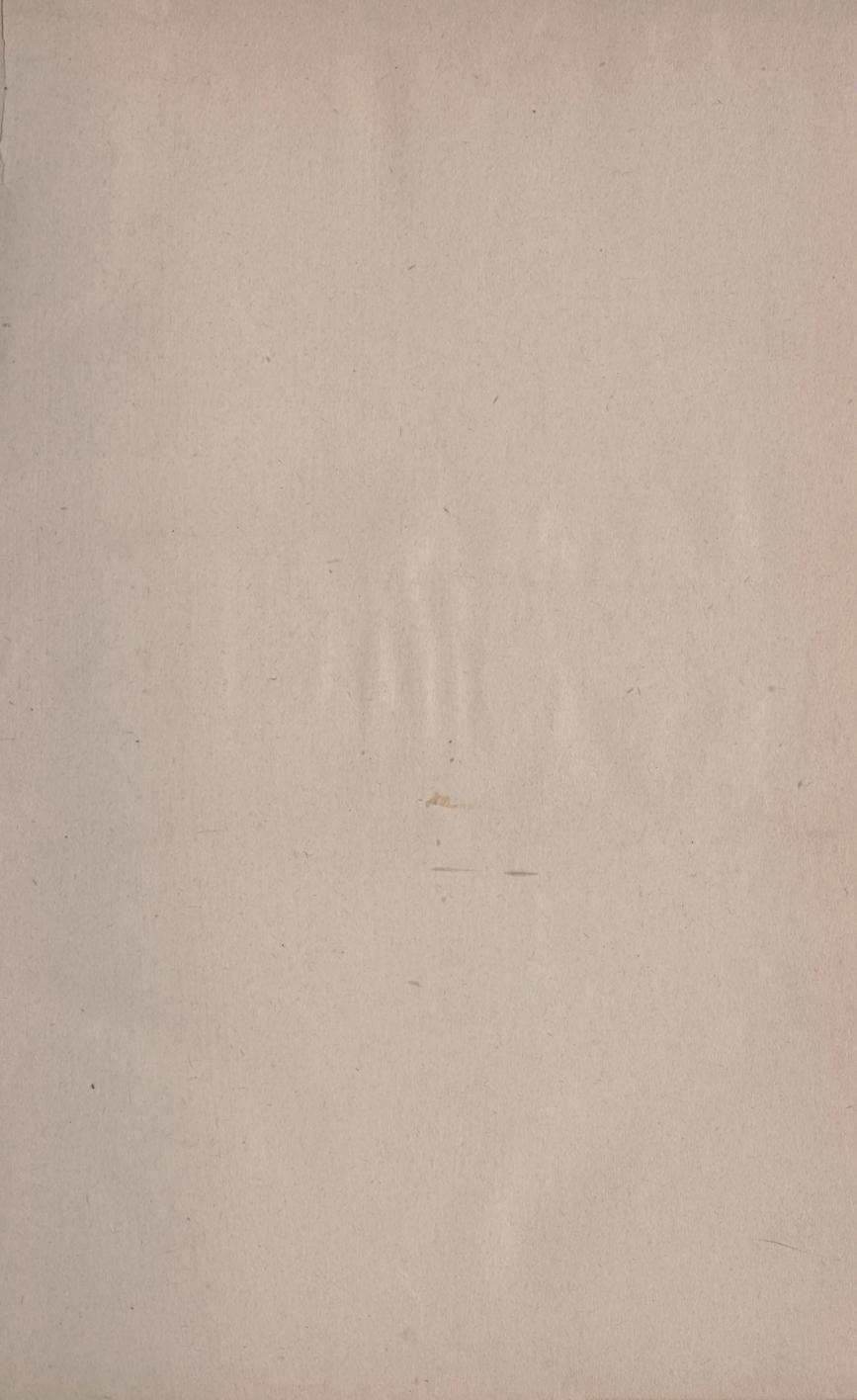
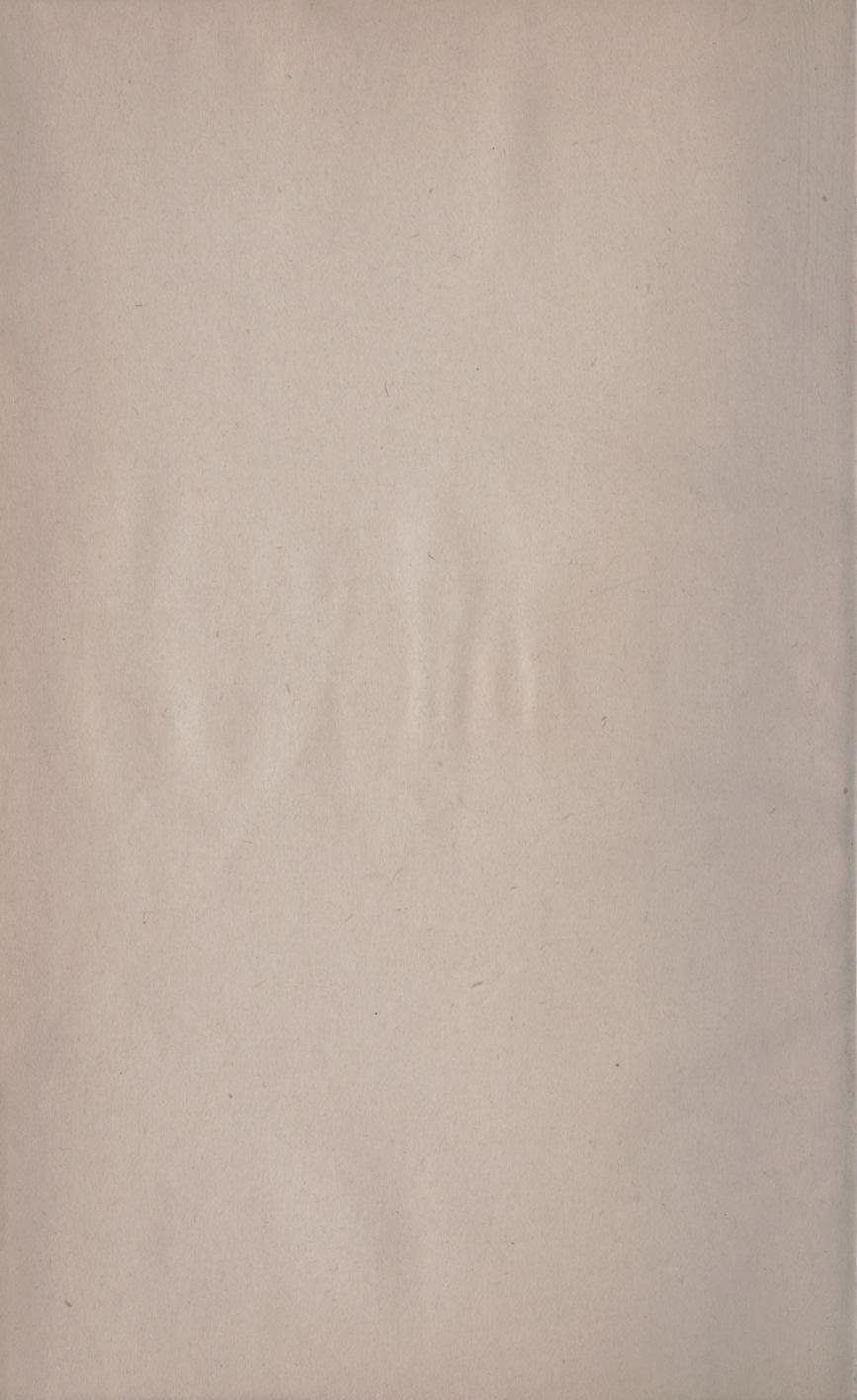


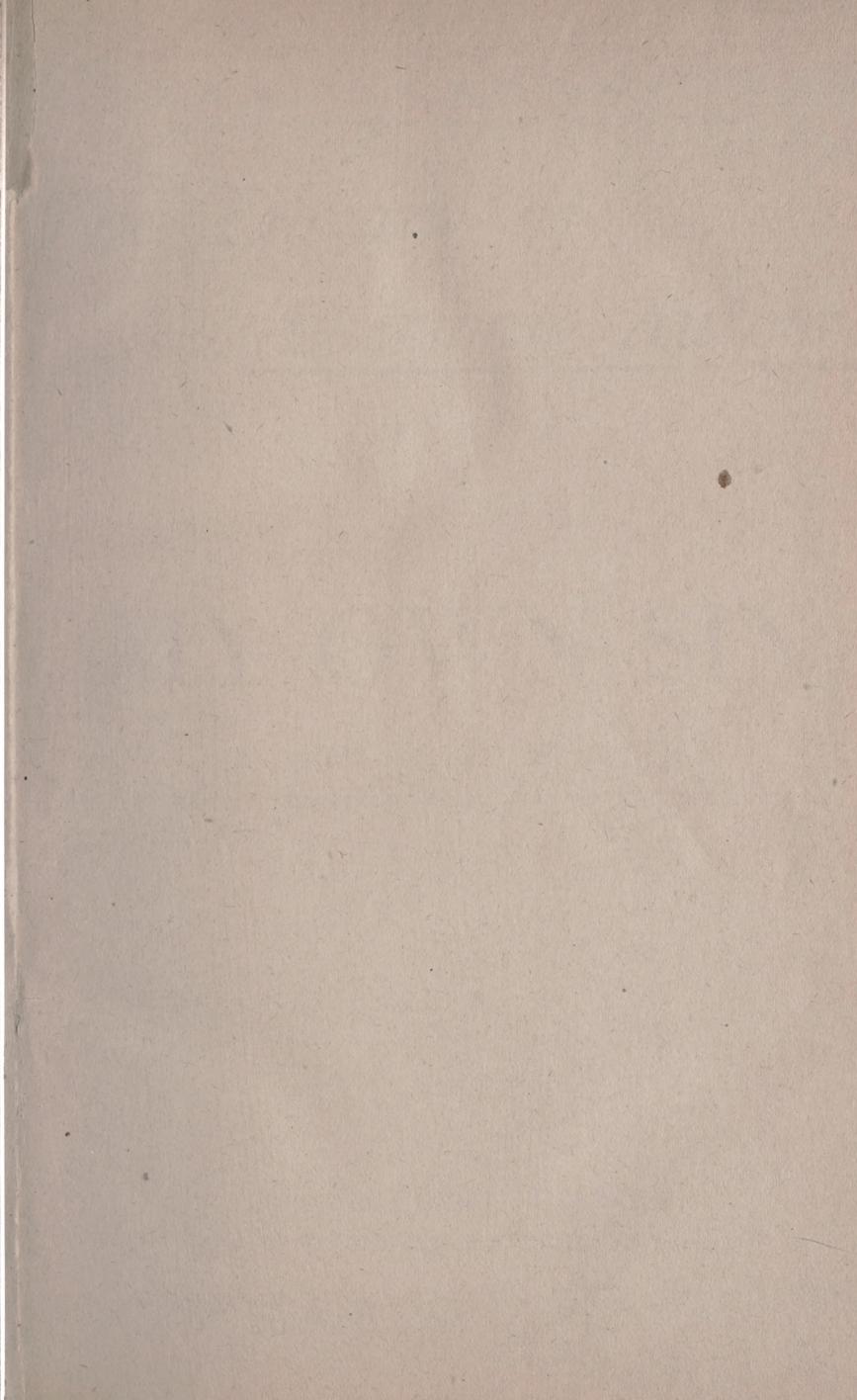
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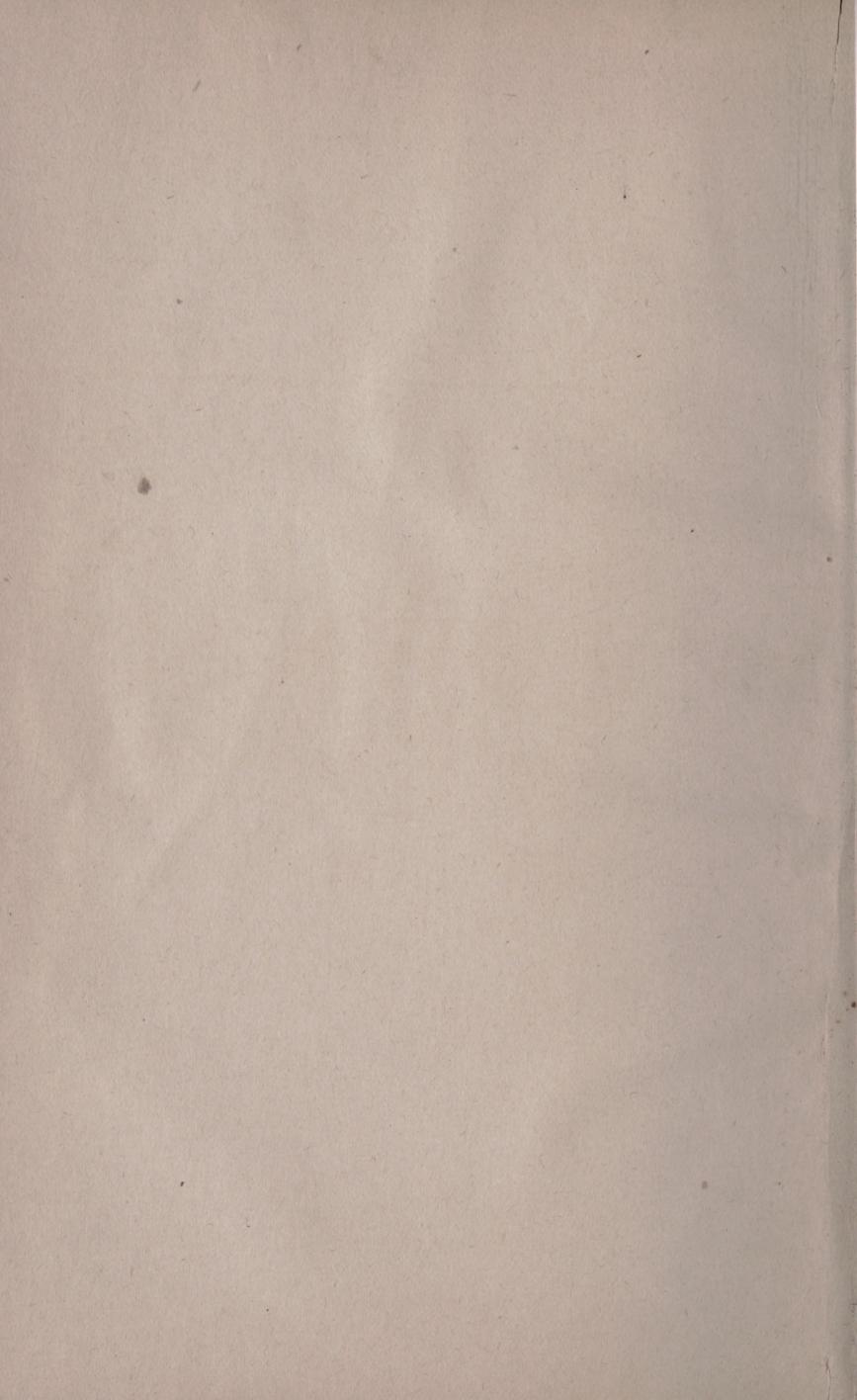
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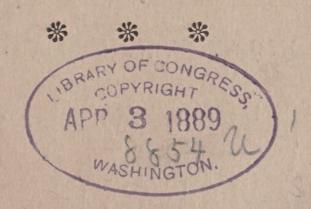
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### MY OWN SIN.

#### CHAPTER I.

THE sin was mine. I feel it in every remorseful throb of my heart. The punishment was mine, but alas! not mine alone.

The root of my sin—it reaches down into the depths of my nature—it touches the mystery of heredity and of the pre-natal influences.

I was born during the stormy time of our Civil War. My father had been an active politician in the South—an orator, whose impassioned eloquence swayed the multitude to his will. He led a battalion in the war, and fell at the head of his command in one of the latest and bloodiest battles of that desperate struggle.

I inherited his ambitious, passionate nature. The lawlessness, the fever and strife of that era are in my blood.

After the war my mother, a pretty, amiable, weak little woman, lived for years in the stately old plantation home, with its massive pillared veranda and its neglected pleasure-grounds—lived upon the meager income obtained by renting the broad rice and cotton lands that had once been cultivated by slaves; then, finding that mortgage and ruin stared her in the face, she sold the plantation, paid her debts, and drifted to New York.

She set up a boarding-house—of all things in the world!
—furnishing it with the money the sale of her southern home had brought.

Never did a more graceful and charming landlady pre-

side at a boarding-house table; never were meals more daintily served; but the scheme was a failure. The servants ran over her, the boarders failed to pay their bills, and, to crown all, she married one of them—a plausible, well-dressed fraud, who was deeply in arrears to her for board, and whose oily tongue succeeded in convincing her that she would be cheated and worried out of reason unless she put her affairs into his capable hands.

He proved a tyrant. His brutality and selfishness nearly wore out the life of his meek victim. They might have crushed her completely but for me. Child though I was, Hagan was afraid of me. I defied him recklessly; I told him he was a brute, unworthy to touch my mother's hand. When he tried to punish me he got the worst of it. No cat was more active than I, and none had sharper teeth and nails, or used them with fiercer energy in self-defense.

At the end of five years, after spending all my mother's small means, Hagan left her, and went back to his native England.

The furniture and all my mother's jewels were sold to pay debts, and we moved into a shabby lodging-house, where we three lived. I say we three, for there was a child that bore Hagan's hated name, and had his yellow hair and violet eyes, with the creamy skin and delicate features of my mother.

I am ashamed to say that I hated that child at first. I took charge of her, and fed her and nursed her through her infantine ailments because that was a duty; but I would never kiss or caress her—not even after I had grown in my heart to love her.

One day, when I had been suffering with nervous headache, and lay on the lounge with closed eyes, she thought me asleep, and came tripping softly around, smoothing the pillow, stroking my hair with lightest touch, and at last stooping over and kissing me on the lips—a timid, flurried little kiss that touched me to the core. I opened my eyes, and when she would have slunk away, frightened at what she had done, I caught her to my breast and kissed her fondly. After that I forgot that little Nell had eyes the color of Hagan's. She was my child, not his or even my mother's, and she loved me with unchild-like fervor

We managed to earn a bare support. My mother gave lessons in music to two or three pupils—daughters of people who had known her. I kept the house, cooked the very simple meals, and did the family sewing, besides making bonnets and cheap bathing-suits for a firm that put out such work.

A year went by, and then during the cold weather our little mother took rheumatism and could no longer go out to give lessons. The bonnet-making would not pay for food and shelter. I must do something else. I found, after awhile, employment in a dress-maker's shop—a large establishment where twenty or thirty girls sat in a long, ill-ventilated room, and stitched away at silks, and velvets, and laces for more favored girls to wear—girls whose taper fingers never felt the needle's prick, and who never knew what it was to

"Bend back from weary toil

Lest their tears the work might soil."

Bitter thoughts came into my mind sometimes as I knelt to drape the costly fabrics on the forms of these favorites of fortune. I saw my own face beside theirs in the long mirror. I was as fair as they. More than this, there was a look of distinction in my face. The good blood I had in my veins showed itself in the finely chiseled features and expressive eyes. Yes, I was as well-born as they, and had as much refinement and intelligence, if not cultivation. I had read every book I could borrow or buy from the stalls full of second-hand volumes. Yet what a difference in my lot and theirs! They had pleasures till they were sated of them; jewels, dresses, flowers, lovers who took them to

balls and to the opera and theater—those scenes of enchantment of which I had had a haunting glimpse in my childhood. Poverty closed their doors to me now; Poverty forbade my wearing the soft, beautiful fabrics I handled; Poverty made my mother's bed a hard mattress, and stinted the sugar in her tea, and kept Nell from school, and even from the Sunday afternoon trip to Coney Island which she longed for. Poor little one, she had outgrown her one nice suit.

#### CHAPTER II.

Spring was opening at last. The buds were bursting on the boughs of the great trees in the square. The snow had all melted, and the sun shone warm on the pavement.

My hopes had brightened with the days. My weekly pay had been increased. I was now assistant fitter in Miss Nipper's establishment.

The twentieth of April was my twentieth birthday. That fateful day!—how well I remember it—the day I first saw Gerald Oldridge—my Jerry. Yes, I will call him mine still—mine in spite of all—in spite of my sin and its consequences—mine, first, last and forever.

I wore a new dress that day—a nut-brown woolen gown, lighted up with crimson velvet at the neck and wrists. And my new brown straw hat had a bunch of red poppies in the loops of brown ribbon that trimmed it.

That hat was the cause of my knowing Gerald. As I was going home on that afternoon of my birthday, there came up a sudden gust of wind and rain; the hat was blown from my head as I was crossing Sixth Avenue. I turned to recover it, but it had been whirled on the track of the street-cars, directly in front of a rapidly advancing car. The horses' feet would soon crush it to fragments—my pretty new hat! I uttered a little cry of dismay. It had hardly left my lips when I saw a young man throw

himself in front of the car and snatch up the hat with his right hand, while the left was thrown out to check the horses, whose feet were almost upon the hat. He rescued it undamaged, however. He came up to me, smiling and flushed, brushing off a few grains of dust from the ribbon with his handkerchief, then holding the hat out to me with a bow. How handsome he looked! I can see him now—my Jerry!

"Oh, I thank you," I said, blushing. "It would have

been crushed but for you."

"And the rain will spoil it yet unless you will take my umbrella," he said, as a flurry of rain dashed into our faces. "The rain is not good for make-believe poppies, however much it may freshen real ones."

He had put up his umbrella, and was offering it to me as he spoke.

"I can't deprive you of your umbrella," I said. "You have a new hat to spoil as well as 1."

"Will you let me hold it over us both, then, until you get home?"

I had been taught not to accept any attentions from a strange man in the streets, but this little kindness was offered so simply and respectfully and with such a winning grace! Moreover, the rain was dashing into my face. I forgot all prudent teachings. I accepted the umbrella and the company of its owner with a flurried "Thank you," and he stepped to my side and walked with me down Seventeenth Street, shielding me from the rain with utter disregard of himself.

The spring shower was over before we reached the lodging-house. It had only freshened the sidewalks, and the few sharp flashes of lightning had filled the atmosphere with electricity. I felt it tingling in my veins, as we walked along, and glowing in my cheeks.

We chatted in friendly fashion as we went. I found he was from the South like myself, from the same state; that

he knew several of my relations, some of them distinguished. I found that his father had been Judge Oldridge, an eminent jurist in his native state, and a friend of my father.

This was a good deal for two who were strangers to learn about each other during a short walk in the rain. It came about through my dropping my hand-bag, and his picking it up and reading my name, that I had embroidered on the brown satin back in red silk letters.

"Hilda Monteagle," he read. "What an uncommon name. I never knew but one family who bore the name of Monteagle, and that was in the South. Warren Monteagle, I have heard, was called the silver-tongued orator of my native state—Mississippi."

"Warren Monteagle was my father," I said, proudly, and I forgot for a moment that I was Miss Nipper's sewing-girl, and that the rain was likely to spot the only new dress I could hope for this spring.

"Your father! Then we are no longer strangers," he exclaimed, his eyes kindling as he looked at me, "for Warren Monteagle was the friend of my father—Judge Stanley Oldridge."

"Oh, I am so glad!" I exclaimed, impulsively, then felt myself blushing, for he gave me a beaming look, and answered quickly:

"So am I. I shall bless this sudden April storm and the impudent wind that blew off the pretty hat. There is a fate in all things, even in the winds that seem to blow where they list, as the Good Book tells us. I knew you must be a southerner. You have the eye and the voice that belong to the South, the proud little poise of the head, and the step, as though you were treading ancestral halls."

"Alas! for the ancestral halls," I answered, with a laugh that was not very mirthful. "We fallen princesses put up with the narrow, dingy halls of lodging-houses, smelling of boiling cabbage instead of magnolia blossoms."

"But the scent of the magnolia blossoms seems to hang round you still," he answered, looking at me again. "And nearly all of you southern girls in New York are engaged in rebuilding your fallen fortunes by your good gifts of brain and skill. You now—I can tell you what you are doing here. Your vocation is art. Is it not so?"

I hesitated an instant. Then I threw up my head and

answered, with a little defiant bitterness:

"Yes, my vocation is art, but it does not happen to be the art that reproduces nature or beautiful dreams and fancies upon canvas; it is the art that makes gowns for fine ladies to wear. I am a sewing-girl in a dress-maker's shop."

He gave me such a look—so full of sympathy and kindly interest! He seemed to lean closer to me as he said:

"I am sure you ennoble your vocation. And Oscar Wilde has told us that dress-making is one of the fine arts. I feel confident that you will find something more congenial to you in time. Your face assures me of this. Your eyes and your brow bespeak ambition, your mouth and chin energy and resolution. You see I am a physiognomist. We all are in some degree."

We had reached the door of the lodging-house.

"Will you come in and speak to my mother?" I asked. "She will be glad to see the son of my father's friend."

"Not now. I will come soon to pay my respects to her—some evening or some Sunday. I am busy all the workdays of the week. I am a book-keeper in my uncle's down-town establishment. The work is not much more congenial than your dress-making, but we can not have everything our way in this world."

Little Nell had answered my touch on the bell that marked our rooms in the fourth story. She opened the door of the hall, her blue eyes dancing with pleasure, as they always did, to see me, but the sight of the falling drops clouded her little face.

"Oh, it's raining! I'm so 'fraid it will be raining Sunday, so we can't go to the park and give the big monkey at the Zoo the pea-nuts I've been saving for him," she said.

"Oh, it is only an April shower," Gerald said, reassuring her. "It will be bright enough by day after to-morrow, and if you will only let me come and go with you to the park, you shall have a box of candy for the monkey. You should see him crunch sugar-plums!"

"I should love to," cried Nell; "and you may go with us, I'm sure. Mayn't he, Hilda?"

I said yes, my heart throbbing with the pleasure of anticipation, and Gerald Oldridge bade us good-bye, shaking hands with me as we stood on the stoop, and kissing Nell, who told me gravely afterward that he was a nice young man, and "kissed sweet." "His mustaf don't tickle a bit," she said. "It's soft, like your bangs, Hilda. It's not stiff, like old Mr. Botty's, the baker. He kisses me when I go for the bread, and his beard sticks my chin like pins."

"You are beginning quite early to know about gentlemen's mustaches, my little miss," I said, gayly, as I ran upstairs. "You are not six until next week. Monday week is your birthday, and to-day is mine, and I have had no party, but I have had a present."

"Yes, I gave you a pin-cushion, made outer my dollie's red velvet bonnet. I made it myself," said Nell.

"So you did, darling," I answered, remorsefully, for I had not thought of her poor little pin-cushion. I was thinking of the bunch of roses and valley lilies Gerald Oldridge had bought from an itinerant flower peddler at the street corner and given to me. I would keep them always, I said to myself. I have them now—withered treasures—dead, like so many of my girlish hopes.

He came Sunday afternoon, soon after lunch, and took us to the park—little Nell and me. Mother could not yet walk enough to go, but Gerald brought her a new magazine, and she was happy to see our happiness in the anticipated pleasure of the walk and the sight-seeing on this balmy spring day.

She found Gerald "the image of his mother," whom she had known in her girlhood. A beautiful woman, she said. I could well believe it, for surely there never were such eyes—gray-blue with a dash of lion-like yellow in their depths—and never such a perfectly molded mouth and chin as belonged to this son, who was said to resemble her so.

What a perfect afternoon we had. First, a drive around the principal parts of the park, then walking along the winding paths, peering into the grotto, and the summerhouses, and all the other nooks and by-ways, a visit to the Zoo, and a little lunch, sitting on the rocks—a lunch that Gerald's thoughtfulness had provided. Nell was so tired when we came back he had to carry her in his arms for a block after we left the cars. She declared she had never had such a good time. And I—oh, I knew I had never been so happy!

After that he came often—two evenings at least during the week, and always on Sunday, all summer long. Oh, that summer! My heart aches to-day as it echoes the words of the plaintive pansy song:

"The fairest, sweetest summer that ever I have known."

I was deliriously happy all the time, though we had to work hard in the shop, and sew from morning till night, making the crêpe ball-dresses, the China silk tea-gowns, the braided yachting costumes, the coquettish tennis-suits, and white and scarlet bathing-dresses for the fashionable ladies who were getting ready for their pleasure and flirting campaign at mountain and sea-side resorts.

They hurried us often with more energy than consideration. It was getting so hot in the city, everybody was going. There would soon not be a soul left in town. "Do, Miss Nipper, make those girls of yours hurry up. I must have another matinée; yes, and a blue tulle ball-dress to match my pearl and turquois set. It seems to me you are doing everything for Mrs. Van Kipp. What does she want with all those dresses? and so ridiculously décoletté, and she a married woman—forty if she's a day."

I smiled as I stitched up the side seams of Mrs. Van Kipp's India gown—smiled over the statement that there would soon not be a soul left in town.

Gerald would be here. He was not going away, and the Casino would be here, and Coney Island and Long Beach and High Bridge and the park. What cared I for Newport and the Adirondacks?

I had a passion for pretty things, and I would have liked to have had a China silk gown—a cream ground sprinkled with clusters of blue hyacinths or red geraniums—but my gingham and muslin dresses were becoming, and my straw hat was newly trimmed with black lace and crushed roses. I wore them when I went with Gerald to the Casino to hear the light, rippling music or sit on the roof in the moonlight, and on little Sunday or Saturday afternoon excursions to the various beaches or to the park or High Bridge, usually accompanied by Nell and sometimes by mamma, but occasionally just our two selves.

How sweet it all was! I never thought of envying the rich girls who were dancing and yachting and flitting from one summer resort to another. I had envied them last year, but now it was bliss enough to me to go with Gerald over the cool, green water to Manhattan or Brighton Beach, to stroll by the "many-sounding sea," looking at the streams of people, or to sit on the breezy piazzas, lunching under striped awnings while the band played gay airs from Italian operas, and the waves broke in diamond spray on the sands.

It was quieter in the park or at High Bridge. Work was dull as the summer advanced, and I got off early.

Gerald and I would take the elevated cars for a little trip to the park to see the sun set from the bridge that spans the arm of water in which is the tiny Swan's-nest Island.

The female swan was setting. We would hang over the railing to watch her stately greeting of her husband, who, after he was tired of swimming and diving his long neck in the water to get at once a cool dip and a mouthful of food, would sail slowly up to the island, mount its rocks with clumsy splay feet, and pluck his wife gently off the nest, taking her place while she went for her evening exercise and her supper.

"A model husband," Gerald would say, with his mellow laugh. "We bachelors should come here for a conjugal lesson."

I can not bear now to look at that bridge and the swan island, nor yet at the little vine-covered pavilion at Harlem, where we used to sit sometimes and eat an ice and drink a tiny cup of coffee on Sunday afternoons, amusing ourselves by watching the quiet enjoyment of the various family parties seated at the little tables, and the coquetting and love-making of the girls and their beaus.

One afternoon, I remember, there came a sudden shower like the one in the midst of which we had first seen each other. The cool, sweet drops pattered through the grape-vines and wet the puffed sleeves of my pretty gown of pale primrose-yellow veiling. Gerald was worried because of the faint stains the rain-drops left. I have that little dress now, packed with other souvenirs of that blissful time. Other drops than those of the summer rain have stained it since then; my hot tears have fallen upon it, as I remembered how happy I was.

"A sorrow's crown of sorrow Is remembering happier things."

#### CHAPTER III.

THE summer was drawing to a close. The leaves were reddening on the sumac and maple-trees in the park. The air in the late afternoons was growing crisp. The fashionables were beginning to return from the sea-shore, the Catskills and the White Mountains.

We saw some of them in dashing equipages and on horseback in the park as Gerald and I walked there in the hazy sunshine of the September afternoon—a sunshine eclipsed at intervals by a shadow that crept dreamily over the landscape, seeming to presage the blight and chilliness of coming winter.

Such a vague, prophetic shadow came over my own happiness that afternoon. We had been walking a long time, and had seated ourselves on one of the way-side settees to rest.

We were silent, feeling the tender melancholy that hung in the air and sounded in the thin, plaintive pipe of the grasshopper in the weeds behind us.

A leaf from the tree overhead fell at my feet like a wounded bird with blood-spots on its yellow wings. I picked it up.

"It is a token that the summer is going," I said—"the summer that has been so sweet."

I glanced at a little sprig of golden rod I held, and quoted a verse from a poem we had read together:

"The golden rod is a-bloom,
Our dream must soon be over,
It will find with the summer its tomb—
Is it not best so, my lover?
Born of the summer's sweet—
A fitful, passionate fever;
Let it go with her swallows fleet,
And be Memory no retriever."

"Summer may go, but true love is not a rover," he said, looking at me tenderly. His hand closed over mine that held the flowers. He had never told me in so many words that he loved me, but I could not doubt the language of his eyes, and the caressing tones of his voice, and the many tokens he had given of his interest in me.

At this moment a handsome landau, drawn by a pair of glossy bay horses, turned the curve of the drive. Three ladies occupied the carriage—one elderly, the others young. They were richly and stylishly dressed. As they were passing us, a fan dropped from the lap of one of them, and the carriage was stopped until the footman could pick it up. One of the young ladies bowed to Gerald, who rose and lifted his hat; then the elder lady put up her lorgnette and looked first at Gerald and then at me. The glance she gave me was keen, contemptuous, suspicious; then her eyes went back to Gerald significantly, and she bowed stiffly to him.

I looked at him as the carriage drove away, and saw a flush and a look of annoyance on his face. The thought came into my mind:

"These are some of his fashionable friends. They are surprised to see him with a girl who is not of their set—a girl in a cashmere gown and a bonnet not made by a French milliner."

For the first time a sense of the difference in Gerald's social position and my own came to me—came with a sting. I knew that he moved in circles to which I could not have admittance. He was known as the nephew and probably the future partner of a man reputed to be rich, who lived in excellent style on a fashionable street, and whose wife was a member of Grace Church, a patroness of fashionable charities, who went out a great deal, and entertained handsomely at her own home.

Gerald's salary, though far from large, enabled him to dress well, and his fine face, tall, graceful figure and easy manners made him sought after in society, where young men of fine appearance command a premium. He was invited everywhere, though he rarely went, unless when his aunt pressed him into service as an escort.

Several times he had called to see us in evening-dress, saying he must go later with his aunt to a ball or a reception. He seemed so reluctant to leave our society and plain little room for the festive company and brilliant pleasure halls that I had felt no twinge of jealousy, and admired him in his elegant dress as light-heartedly as Nell herself.

Now, for the first time, I realized the difference between our social positions. I was his equal in birth and refinement, yet I stood on a lower social plane. The look of surprise and disdain in the eyes of those young women, the bridling of their chaperon's long neck, and her virtuously scornful glance at me and stiff bow to Gerald told me all in a flash. The looks of the young buds said plainly: "I wonder what Gerald Oldridge is doing with that girl?" The mother's glance said: "She is no better than she ought to be, of course, and it's pretty bold in him to let himself be seen with her in this public way."

I felt my cheeks flaming. I turned to Gerald and asked abruptly:

"Are you ashamed of me?"

"Ashamed of you? Surely not. I am proud of you, Hilda. Why did you ask such a question?"

"Because I saw you blush when your fine friends looked at us."

"If I blushed it was not for you, but for their rudeness. Good breeding and money do not always go together. And they are not friends of mine, only acquaintances. Don't think about them any more."

But the wound still smarted, and I said after awhile, with a bitter little laugh:

"You can tell them I am only your summer girl, taken

up for pastime while they are away. I don't want you to lose caste on my account."

A pained look came into his eyes.

- "Hilda," he said, gravely, "is that remark just to me?"
  - "I was jesting—partly," I answered.
- "I don't like a jest upon such a subject, and I felt the under-tone of bitterness in what you said. I know you do not believe that my friendship for you has been a mere summer pastime, do you?"

"How can I tell?" I managed to say. My voice trembled, for the tears were close under my dropped lids.

"Hilda, you surely know that my attentions to you have been respectful and earnest—that I esteem you—love you. Yes; I love you, Hilda, as a man loves the woman he wants for his wife."

A thrill of happiness ran through me at his words. They had the ring of truth and tenderness. Down fell a big tear from my dropped lashes—splash it fell upon Gerald's hand.

"Hilda"—his voice was tender, but it had a troubled tone; I raised my eyes; his own were clouded—"Hilda, I am afraid I ought not to have spoken as I did just now. I am afraid I have done wrong in being so much in company this summer. You have become too dear to me for us to part, and I have—it may be—become more than a friend to you. And it was not right for me to become this unless I could offer to make you my wife at once. And I can not do this, Hilda."

"It is the social barrier," I said, drawing away from him, my eyes flashing through the tears.

"Hilda, darling, it is not the social barrier. It is merely the barrier of prudence and forethought. Listen to me. You have more common sense than any girl I know. I will tell you my position exactly, and you shall decide what is best. I owe my education, my support for years, to my

uncle. My father was generous and extravagant. His estate hardly sufficed to pay his debts. My uncle sent me to college. My inclinations pointed to my father's profession—the law; but gratitude to my uncle made me yield to his wishes and take a commercial course. He wanted me to enter the counting-room of his manufacturing house. After I graduated he gave me a place in his establishment as assistant book-keeper. The salary is small. My uncle is neither a generous nor a rich man—not nearly as rich as he is believed to be. His business at this moment is a little shaky, and he needs more capital to put it on a firm basis. I am telling you tales out of school, Hilda-business secrets-but I must let you know, that you may understand my position. I am living with my uncle. My salary would not support me if I boarded elsewhere. What he expects of me-what he urges me to do-is to marry a rich woman, put her money into his business, and become his partner."

"Is there any particular rich woman he wishes you to marry?" I asked, controlling my voice as well as I could.

"Yes; the particular rich woman has already been chosen. She was chosen, in fact, long ago by my father and her mother. She is the niece of my uncle's wife. I knew her as a child. Her mother lived near us, and this girl—six years younger than I—was her only child. I think my father and her mother had loved each other in their youth and been estranged by a misunderstanding. They were very tenderly attached to each other after they became widowed, but they did not marry. They were anxious, however, that their children should marry. I was taught to look on the girl as my future wife. My father always called her 'Jerry's little wife' when he spoke to her or of her. There was a double tie, for my uncle had married her mother's sister. My uncle knew and highly approved of this boy and girl engagement. think he had it in view, with its money advantages, when

he was so liberal to me in the way of education. He expected that her money would one day build up his business."

- "And the girl—she is here?"
- "No, she is in Florida. I have not seen her for several years, not since she was twelve years old—she is now seventeen. Her health was always delicate—it is now so bad that she is believed to be doomed. Her physician ordered her to go to Florida. Her father died of consumption, and it is believed that it has fallen upon her as a heritage."

"Did-you-love-her?"

- "I was attached to her when we were children. We were often together. She was always put in my charge by her mother, and I took care of her. She was very fond of me, and would go with me everywhere over the plantation. She rode behind me on my horse until she could manage a pony herself. She trudged after me when I went partridge or squirrel hunting, and I have often had to carry her in my arms. I taught her to read and write, to ride and to play croquet and draughts. Indeed, as she was too delicate to go to school, she was given up a great deal to me while I stayed at home with my tutor until my father died and the old place and all my possessions were sold."
  - "You love her, then?"
- "Love her!—a little, sallow, sickly child? I was sorry for her—attached to her as to a young sister. I never loved any woman until I knew you, Hilda, my darling."

He pressed my hand under my shawl. I was silent for a moment, then I said:

- "But surely your uncle does not expect you to marry her, now that she has consumption, and is not expected to get well?"
- "He is more eager for it than ever—both he and his wife. They have been away, as you know, for two months. They came back only last night. They have

seen Elsie while they were away. She was with them at the springs in Virginia. She is under the charge of an old lady—a distant relation. My aunt said that already—and though she was in such wretched health—Elsie was an object of attraction—as an heiress. Her physician was overattentive, she thought. She urged me to go to Florida and marry her at once."

"You are really engaged to her, then?"

"No; there has been no formal engagement since we were children. But it is tacitly understood that we are to marry when she is eighteen. She writes me a letter every week—a child-like, confiding letter, such as a sister might write to a brother, and I reply in brotherly fashion. Not a word of love or marriage."

Again there was silence. The sunset was fading in the west—dusk was gathering about us. The drive was almost deserted, and we were the only ones left sitting on the benches. I was wondering why Gerald did not at once tell his uncle that he could not marry the girl who had been half-way betrothed to him from their childhood, why he did not let her know that he could not keep this child-ish pledge. This would be the most straightforward and honorable course, though it is true there were obstacles in the way of such a direct avowal. Gerald must have divined my thoughts, for he said:

"You are thinking that it would be more manly and more just to Elsie to tell her and tell my uncle that I could not marry her. But remember how unsettled and uncertain everything is. It seemed to me that active measures were not needed yet. Time might set things straight. Elsie might in all probability die before her eighteenth birthday, the sixth of next May, or I might put off the marriage until next fall, and she would hardly live so long. You see, my darling, I am not yet in a position to defy my uncle's wishes. I have been for some time studying law, under an able jurist here, a friend of my

father's. My father helped him with money and influence when he was struggling to rise. He is grateful, and he will help me. As soon as I am admitted to the bar he will take me into partnership, and I shall then feel at liberty to ask my Hilda to be my darling little wife."

"And you will never marry Elsie?"

"Never. I don't think I could have married her even if I had not met you. It seems too mercenary an act now that she is in a hopeless decline. If indeed she loves me so much that her happiness depends on me, as my aunt declares, I might have married her and tried to make the short remnant of her life as bright as possible, but I can't think she cares for me so deeply. She was too young when we parted. My aunt says she has cherished a romantic devotion for me—that all my little boyish keepsakes are treasured in her trunk, that she hangs over my picture rapturously and kisses it good-night after she has said her prayers. My aunt told me all this last evening. It made me feel very badly. If it is true, I ought to write at once and let Elsie know my real feelings. But my aunt's imagination may be influenced by the thought of Elsie's fortune—the four hundred thousand that she hopes may help to bolster her husband's business some day. I must undeceive them. It is wrong to postpone it any longer, only, as I have told you, nothing was settled. I thought it probable until I knew and loved you that I would marry Elsie. I remembered her as an amiable, affectionate child-my father's favorite. He had set his heart on our marriage. He betrothed us solemnly when I was sixteen and she ten years old. He made us kneel by his bed, and he joined our hands and blessed us. Her mother did the same thing a year or two later. No wonder that such a solemn ceremony impressed Elsie's childish imagination, and that she thinks it is binding. I felt it so a long while, but marriage is too sacred an obligation, too important a thing to be entered upon only because of a promise given

before the years of discretion. Since I have known you I have felt what love and marriage really mean, and I feel I ought to tell my uncle and tell Elsie, or let him do it, that I can not marry her. Do you not think so?"

I hesitated. I could see he wished to temporize—to postpone this declaration, hoping that time would set things right—that Elsie's death or her falling in love with some one else—her physician, perhaps—invalids usually worship their doctors—would preclude the necessity for telling his uncle what would surely make an immediate rupture between them.

I knew which was the manliest and most honorable course; but I felt, too, that there was a weak strain in the character of the man I loved, amiable and noble as I knew him to be, and I loved him so well that I sympathized with this weakness. I wanted to spare him any pain and anxiety. It would be bad for him to be thrown out of business and out of home with the stigma of his uncle's displeasure upon him. So, when I spoke, it was to advise him to do nothing just yet; there would be no harm in waiting.

It was fatal advice.

I felt a misgiving that it was the moment the words had passed my lips.

- "When is this Elsie coming?" I asked.
- "In April—seven months from now. Many things may happen in seven months."
- "And she has so much money—four hundred thousand, did you say?"
- "She has that much in bonds and stocks alone, besides her landed estates. The fortune came through her grandmother on her father's side. It will go, every penny, to a relative that she does not care for, if she dies before she is married; if she marries first, it passes to her husband. Such is the will."

"Four hundred thousand in money alone! What a large sum that seems to poor me!"

"If only a tenth or a twentieth of it were mine, we would be married to-morrow—that is, if you would have me. Hilda, do you know you have not said you would? Do you know you have not even said you loved me? Do you love me, dear one? Tell me."

"You know that I love you," I answered.

All my being thrilled as he leaned nearer and his breath touched my cheek. He drew me to him—there was no one in sight, and the friendly shadows veiled us—our lips met in the long, burning kiss of young love. His arms were about me, and our hearts beat together in quick throbs of passion.

That kiss—that embrace should never have passed between us while there was a barrier to our marriage. When two beings are young and full of ardent emotions, and heart is seeking heart while yet a union is impossible, it is daring fate to allow the barriers of reserve to be broken down even by a kiss. It seems a simple thing, but it is too often the spark that explodes the best built schemes of prudence and reason.

### CHAPTER IV.

I, at least, was never the same after that evening in the park. A spirit of unrest took possession of me. Discontent was born in my breast, succeeded by bitterness and envy.

When Gerald looked in upon us now on his way to a reception or a ball, I did not wish him a happy evening with the old light-hearted jollity. He was going where I could not go—where he would meet women in those graceful, picturesque costumes and rich jewels I could not wear. He would see them more bewitching from their beautiful environment of satin and mirror-paneled walls, flowers,

music, rose-shaded lights, making their fairness yet more ravishing.

I pictured to myself Gerald whirling in the waltz, with one of these fair, fortunate ones in his arms, her white hand, sparkling with diamonds, resting on his shoulder, her eyes looking up into his.

Then, with this picture in my mind, I looked across the little room at my own reflection in the small dressing-case mirror. How insignificant seemed my figure in the plain, brown cashmere and linen collar befitting one of Miss Nipper's young women, and how common I must seem to Gerald compared to the women he met in the circle he was privileged to move in!

"What's the matter, sister? What makes you look so cross? You haven't smelled the roses Jerry brought you," little Nell would say.

I buried my face among the red roses to hide from her keen little eyes the shadow of the pain that filled my breast—a jealous, envious pain that could only be eased by Gerald's kisses and his impassioned avowal that he cared nothing for the fair women he met in society—that his little girl in her brown cashmere was a hundred times sweeter and dearer.

"If this is true you would be eager to marry me at any cost," I said one night, as we sat by the smoldering coals alone in the little sitting-room. Mother had taken Nell to bed, and fallen asleep beside her while she was telling her the story of Princess Rosamond and the King of the Peacocks.

His arm relaxed its clasp of my waist, as he said, reproachfully:

"Hilda, you forget it was you who decided it would be unwise for us to marry now. It was you who reminded me that my uncle would be angry, and that I was as yet dependent on his favor, and that even if I kept my place with him, my salary would not be enough to support us

four upon. My wife could not continue to be a dress-fitter in Miss Nipper's shop. It was you who said that. You were anxious for me to keep my social position; you reminded me that this would be of great advantage to me when I came to practice law. You talked all over with me in a business-like, yet sweet and womanly way, and filled me with wonder. You said we loved and trusted each other so entirely we could afford to wait a year or two."

I knew it. I knew I had said just those things, used just those arguments. I had seen that for him to marry at this stage of his career would be fatal to his prospects for the future, and I had said that we must and could "bide a wee"—had said it cheerfully and confidently at the time. But now the demon of jealousy and doubt had entered my breast. My hold upon Gerald seemed uncertain. He belonged to another sphere of life. The truth was that I felt in my heart a consciousness that my lover's character, sweet and noble as it was, had one defect. was wanting in strength of will. His weakness of purpose had been revealed to me by the way he had borne himself in the matter of his relation to that invalid heiress. action had not been straightforward to her or to his uncle. He had temporized, postponed the decisive declaration that he could not marry her. Partly this was from necessary policy, but more from weakness of will.

And might not this same weakness lead him to yield at last to his uncle's and aunt's strong desire to marry the girl he was in a manner bound to? Might not their influence or some other draw him away from me? And I could not give him up. His love, his companionship had grown dearer to me every day. They made the sole happiness of my narrow life. How could I live if I lost him?

I leaned nearer to him. I laid my head against his shoulder, whispering:

"I did say all those things, dear Jerry. I have not for-

gotten. I did mark out that path of wisdom and prudence, but I did not take the weakness of my own heart into consideration. I forgot that there was a dash of Spanish blood in my veins, and that I would feel the pain of jealousy."

He laughed at me, and soothed me then, but the next Sunday I went to the fashionable church he attended, and saw him sitting in a pew with his aunt and a handsome and richly dressed young woman. They sat together, and used the same prayer-book, and her eyes turned to him often during the sermon. I watched them behind my veil, unobserved, until it was impossible to sit quietly and listen to the intoning of the calm-voiced minister any longer. I rose and went out. Gerald did not know until then that I was in the church.

He came that evening. I received him coldly.

"How could you tear yourself away from the young lady you were so devoted to?" I asked.

"I was not devoted to her. She was my aunt's guest."

"And you are your aunt's slave—her lackey; you must dance attendance on her and do her bidding," I broke in, bitterly; then, feeling I had said an unjust thing, I burst into tears.

Gerald took my hand and tried to draw me to him, but I resisted.

"Go," I said. "Don't worry any more with me. Find a sweetheart in your own set—one who has not a bitter, jealous temper—one you can marry and be happy with."

"I will marry no one but you, Hilda," he said, with tender sadness. "I think it would be better if we married without delay. Nothing but marriage will give you confidence in me. I will speak to your mother about it at once. I can get a situation as salesman in a retail store. We can make out to live some way. I will give up my law study, and get some writing to do at night."

"There is no need of this," I said, voicing a thought

that had come to me before. "The marriage could besecret. No one need know it—only my mother. I could continue at my work, and you at yours with your uncle."

His eyes lighted eagerly as he listened to me. Then

they clouded.

"A secret marriage!" he said. "Dear, is it right, do you think? Would your mother approve it?"

"I could soon reconcile her to the idea. She knows exactly how we are situated. But if you have any hesitation—"

"Hilda darling, I only hesitate for your sake. I love you so well I do not want to do anything that might some time put you in a false position. But the marriage could be publicly avowed whenever we liked—whenever it became expedient. And it would prove to you that your doubts are groundless—that I care only for you. Yes, my dearest, we will be married without delay—secretly, if you think best. Let us talk to your mother about it."

My mother had grown to depend almost entirely on my judgment, and to believe that I was wiser in all practical matters than she. So it was not hard to gain her consent to the secret marriage. One week from that day we took a little trip out of town, and when I returned I was Gerald Oldridge's wife.

### CHAPTER V.

For one month I was the happiest mortal on earth.

It was midwinter; snow covered the ground, and the winds were often keen and biting, but it was summer in my heart. I went to my daily work with a buoyant step. I no longer envied the young women whose gowns I fitted. They might have fine clothes, elegant carriages and homes, but they did not have Gerald. And there was no other like him. There was no other such tender, loyal, generous heart as my Jerry's.

Jealous fears no longer tortured me. Gerald came every evening, sometimes only for an hour, but usually he spent the entire evening in our little room, talking to us, or listening to me read aloud, or sing to the accompaniment of my guitar.

Sometimes we two went out to the theater or the opera, getting seats in the balcony, where there was no danger of meeting Gerald's aristocratic friends and kinsfolk. With a good opera-glass and our strong young eyes and ears we enjoyed the acting and the music as well in our lofty perch as though we had had a seat in the curtained boxes whose snowy-armed and jeweled occupants we looked at and commented on from afar.

Gerald's aunt had an attack of rheumatism which kept her in-doors and relieved him from the necessity of acting as her attendant to places of social amusement. He could give his evenings to us, could bring his law-books and study while I sewed or practiced my drawing, for I had begun to take lessons in that art.

My mother and Nellie were almost as fond of Jerry as I was. He was so kind and thoughtful and merry. He never forgot to bring them something—flowers or fruit, a picture-book, or a magazine, a box of candy, or some little household convenience. Poor fellow! he was more generous than wise. He surprised us one day by having a load of nice furniture, with carpets and curtains, sent up to our rooms, fitting them out new and comfortably, even to the kitchen. Then he gave my mother a black silk dress, and replenished my wardrobe with pretty gowns, chosen with excellent taste.

I remonstrated with him for his extravagance. He answered that it was his savings from his salary, and that they could not be better spent. It seemed so then, for we could not foresee what would happen.

For alas! dark days followed these bright ones. My mother was taken very ill with pneumonia. For weeks

her life hung in the balance. I was obliged to give up my place at Miss Nipper's to stay at home and nurse her. The expenses of our household all fell upon Gerald—rent, the hire of a servant—for I could not leave my mother's bedside—food, fuel, physician's services and medicine—all came out of his salary, for what he had saved had been spent before this emergency was upon us.

He borrowed money—there was no other alternative—and thus saddled himself with debt. He was harassed, anxious—I could see it—and I could not help him—could not spare time from my mother and Nellie to soothe or amuse him.

At last my mother was better—was able to sit up—and when I could leave her I went to try to regain my old place at Miss Nipper's. But I could not get it for several weeks, not until the busy season of early spring opened and there was a rush for Easter dresses. Now it was the dull, intermediate time.

I chafed at the enforced idleness. I wanted to earn money to help Gerald with the burden of support for us three. I saw the anxious cloud on his brow. I fancied that he regretted his marriage. I reproached myself with having caused him to take the step.

I got some decorative work to do, but the pay was small, and the work was done at home, where I could sit all day, my fingers moving mechanically while my mind was busy with its old bitter thoughts: rebellion against fate, a wild wish to be rich, that I might free Gerald from his heavy burden, galling to my pride as well as to my love, and that I might live with him openly as his wife, inspire him to rise to eminence as a lawyer, and take the position in society that I felt I was capable of occupying. All this I could do, I felt sure, if I had money.

When the March winds were blowing, and the press of dress-making work had begun, I got back my old place at Miss Nipper's. I worked faithfully, but not as cheerfully

as before. The canker of discontent and ambition was eating into my heart. I was now a wife, though no one knew or guessed it, for I had no intimate friend. No one had visited us through the long, cold winter but the doctor, a Sister of Charity, and once the clergyman of my mother's church.

But though still Hilda Monteagle to the world, the responsibility of wifehood was upon me. I was married, and to a man whose talents and family and social position lifted him above the sphere of those around me. All he needed was money. Oh! for a few thousands of the gold that these women, whose silken skirts I draped, lavished in the diamonds that flashed at their delicate ears and upon their soft fingers!

Often have I bared my arm and looked at the blue veins throbbing beneath its snowy skin, and uttered between my clinched teeth the mad wish that I could coin half that blood, drop by drop, into gold. Freely would I pour it out.

I tried to hide my feelings from Gerald. He was as kind and sweet as ever, and as devoted, though now he was with us less constantly in the evening, because his aunt was well again and going out occasionally and giving entertainments.

My old dislike to have Gerald go into society from which I was debarred came back to me. I had confidence in his love and his fidelity, but I fancied it must lower me in his esteem to think I could not have admittance to that charmed circle. My morbid imagination pictured him as surrounded by beautiful, richly dressed women, who could admire his fine bearing and handsome face, or be attracted by his winning manners and his bright, entertaining talk.

And all the while I was at my poor lodging-house home cleaning up the kitchen, ironing cuffs and collars, hearing Nell's lessons, and trying, when all these tasks were done, to steal a few minutes for my drawing.

I would sit up late, for often now he would come to me at a late hour. I would hear his light step on the shaky stairs of the old lodging-house, and presently he would enter impetuously, muffled in his furred overcoat, pick me up, and shower tingling, frosty kisses on my lips and cheeks.

Then I had a hundred questions to ask—where had he been? whom had he seen?—and he would give me an account of the reception or dancing-party or opera he had been attending, declaring he had been bored to death. He thought to please me; he little guessed what a rebellious longing was in my heart for the time to come when I could go to these places and be a welcome guest of those whom I felt to be only my equals.

Every woman has a longing for the society of other women of congenial tastes. Even the devotion of a man whom she loves can not entirely make her forget this craving for the countenance and companionship of her own sex.

Spring was opening. The snow had all melted from the streets. The buds were bursting on the trees in the square, and the sparrows were twittering their first notes of love-making. One day an old friend in Florida—a venerable bachelor cousin—sent my mother a little box of strawberries. I immediately wrote a note to Gerald. "Come and take dinner with us this evening. I have a treat for you."

That afternoon, when I left the shop at six o'clock, I found Gerald outside waiting for me. He rarely did this, for fear of exciting suspicion, and I was surprised to see him.

"I came to tell you, Hilda, that I can't see you this evening. I'm so sorry, too. My uncle wishes me to go to the depot to meet—some—ladies."

His hesitating speech and the flush on his cheek made me feel at once who these ladies must be. I said:

"It is Miss Vaughn, the heiress, you are going to meet."

- "Yes, it is Elsie Vaughn and her companion and nurse. You remember she was to come in April."
- "I remember now, but I had forgotten about it. I had almost forgotten her existence, you have said so little about her."
- "I did not think you would care to have me talk about her," he said.
- "Have you been hearing from her? Have you had letters from her?" I asked, quickly.
- "She has written occasionally, just as she has done all her life. There is her last letter, written just before she left Florida. Read it; it is short."

I took the letter from its dainty little envelope. It was scented with pressed yellow jasmine flowers that fell out of it as I unfolded the sheet. It began:

"DEAR GERALD"—and went on in a child-like, affectionate strain, sometimes sad, sometimes playful—"I am coming to that big New York I have heard so much about, and I want you to show me all the sights, when I am strong enough. I am not strong enough now, but I think it is the warm, enervating Florida climate. The crisp air of New York will brace me up—so my aunt writes. She has made all kinds of nice plans for me. We are to go to Europe the last of May, as you have heard, no doubt. Are you not going with us? I sha'n't enjoy it half without you. Somehow I feel I shall grow strong when I am with you, you are such a strong, big fellow. I remember how you used to carry me about in your arms. I thought I was all right if I was with you—and poor, dearest mamma thought so, too. You could carry me now as easily as you did then, I fear, for I am very light. I weigh so little I am ashamed to tell the figures. Never mind; I will 'pick up, as my old black mammy says. She is going North with me-she and Cousin Priscilla-but Cousin Priscilla

goes on to Connecticut to see her people. She is Yankee-born, you know."

The letter rambled on in this naïve way. There was not a word of love, but an under-tone of affectionate remembrance.

- "Is she so frail, I wonder?" I said. "Is her health no better?"
- "No better at all—so her physician writes. He seems to regard her as doomed. She does not realize her condition—she has been sick so long."
- "And her fortune will all go to a man who neither needs it nor has any right to it, beyond a few drops of kindred blood?"
  - " Yes."
- "It ought to be yours, Gerald. You ought to have married her and had her fortune to help you rise, instead of burdening yourself with a poor girl you can't own as your wife," I said, with a rush of bitter feeling.
- "Hush, Hilda. Why will you talk in that way? Do you think I would have married a dying girl for her money?"
- "You had been betrothed to her before she was an invalid. She still considers you are engaged to her. She expects you to marry her as soon as she comes."
- "She will not expect it long. I will soon tell her that it can not be. Don't think about this, Hilda; don't worry about it in the least, my little wife. I must go now; I ought to be on my way to the depot. The carriage is waiting for me at the corner."
  - "Shall I see you later to-night?"
- "I am afraid not. My aunt and uncle will expect me to spend this evening at home, helping to entertain the new-comers. To-morrow evening I will come without fail. Save your strawberry treat until then."

He pressed my hand and hurried away. I passed a restless night, an anxious day. I wondered how Elsie Vaughn looked. Was she really so ill? Oh! if she could only will Gerald a little of her money.

"How is she? How does she look?" I asked when he came next evening.

"She is as frail as it is possible for any one to be who is still sitting up and walking about. Really she ought to be in bed all the time, but her wish to get well is so strong, poor girl! How does she look? She is the picture of death."

A few days later I had an opportunity of verifying this. I saw Elsie Vaughn with my own eyes. She came with her aunt, Mrs. Horace Oldridge, to be fitted for some dresses. Miss Nipper's establishment was one of the most fashionable in the city. It comprised three floors of a brown-stone house not a stone's-throw from Broadway. The name on the silver door-plate was not Nipper at all. It read "Mademoiselle Nepeau, Modiste." Mlle. Nepeau—slim, stylish, suave—did her best to look as though born in Paris instead of Massachusetts, to speak with a pretty French accent, and to shrug her shoulders like a thorough French woman. To do her justice, she succeeded admirably, but as no man is a hero to his valet, so no modiste may hope to be infallible in the eyes of her young women.

"Mademoiselle Nepeau's" secret leaked out in the workroom, and the girls, talking among themselves, spoke of
her irreverently as "Nipper." But her French accent
was not questioned by her wealthy patrons. They came
in their carriages, and waited in her handsomely appointed
parlor, where there was a grand piano, some good pictures
on the walls and pretty statuettes in the corners. It was
in this room that Mrs. Oldridge waited with her niece.

The names were brought up by the servant to Miss Nipper, who was very busy looking after the unpacking of a box of imported novelties.

"New customers," she said. "They must be attended to. I can't get away from here just now. Go down and

tell them I will see them preesentlie, Miss Montgell," she said, turning to me. She shortened my name whenever she called it, thinking, no doubt, that an assistant fitter had no business with such a high-sounding cognomen.

I started to my feet. I had been tingling with nervous excitement ever since I heard the names of the two who were waiting in the reception-room.

"Mademoiselle Nepeau, had you not better go down yourself?" I ventured to say in a low voice. "These are wealthy people. The young lady is a southern heiress. She is going abroad, I have heard, and will want a great many dresses."

Mlle. Nepeau looked at me sharply and seemed about to say something cross. But she thought better of it, and telling me to see that the lace fichus and gauzy neckwear were not mussed in unpacking, she shook out the folds of her gray serge gown, adjusted her tournure and went down-stairs.

In a few minutes I received a message from her to come down prepared to measure a lady who was not strong enough to mount the stairs. With fluttering pulses I descended the broad, easy stairway and drew aside the drapery from the door of the parlor. I was about to come face to face with a woman whom I hoped some day to meet on a footing of equality as the wife of her nephew—a rising lawyer as he would then be, and I was about to see the girl to whom my husband was engaged to be married.

Two ladies who had entered the hall-door had been ushered by the servant into the sitting-room the moment before I went in. They were known to Mrs. Oldridge, and they were exchanging with her kisses and expressions of delight at meeting, so my entrance was unnoticed. I glanced at Mrs. Oldridge, seeing, instead of the stately, haughty woman I had somehow expected to see, a plump and pretty matron with a hint of determination, however, in her well-shaped chin.

But my eyes turned from her to the girl who sat in a wide easy-chair—half lying on its cushions, her attitude full of weakness and weariness, her face leaning on her small gloved hand.

Mrs. Oldridge turned to her presently. "Elsie, my dear," she said, "will you stand up a moment while this young woman takes your measure?"

She raised her head and I saw her face. All doubt and jealousy vanished as I looked at it. To my eyes that face bore the unmistakable stamp of death. Surely a corpse could not look more bloodless. The very lips were white, the skin a ghastly bluish-white, livid shades were under the sunken, lack-luster eyes, the hair was dry and dead-looking, the temples hollow, the eyelids purple and shriveled.

I have seen many dead faces look more like-life than this young girl's. I looked at her with mingled emotions of relief and pity. It was a relief to know that there was no ground—not the slightest—for any fear that Gerald should feel for her a warmer sentiment than compassionate sympathy.

She rose to her feet, declining her aunt's assistance, as she said, smiling with wan lips:

"I am quite rested now, Aunt Marian."

She was painfully thin. As I measured her, Mrs. Old-ridge said to Miss Nipper:

"She must have her dresses padded, mademoiselle, until she fills out, as she will after an ocean trip; won't you, dear?"

The girl smiled her little pathetic smile and nodded her head. The next minute she looked into the long panel-mirror and saw the reflection of her own face side by side with mine, as I stood behind her measuring the back of her waist. I was taller by several inches than she. I turned my head quickly to one side. I fancied the contrast must give her pain, but she only said, with her gentle smile:

"What would I give for roses like those you wear in your cheeks. How glad you must be to be so well and strong. You have what money can not buy—sweet health."

Her aunt had turned to speak to Miss Nipper, and did not hear this sad little speech. I liked Miss Vaughn's voice. It was very sweet, but it had that tired, plaintive, invalid tone. Poor girl! I forgot that I had ever been jealous of her—forgot that she thought herself engaged to my husband. I gave a start when an instant later she spoke his name.

"Aunt, was not Gerald to meet us here and drive with us to the park?" she asked.

"No; he told me afterward he preferred to have us stop for him at the Yandel Gallery. If you were not tired he wanted you to look at a picture painted by his friend Eiman, but I am afraid you will be too tired to get out again and look at pictures."

"Oh, no! I feel quite strong," she protested, quickly. She had put out her hand involuntarily, and was leaning it rather heavily on my arm. She smiled as our eyes met, and shook her head a little as though at the inconsistency of her words with the action that belied them. I could see how she clung to the hope of getting well, how she clung to the thought of Gerald. Yet I felt no jealousy, only pity.

They went out, leaving materials for three dresses for Miss Vaughn, which the footman had brought from the carriage. I looked from the window and saw her being assisted into the carriage by Mrs. Oldridge and the plump footman in plain livery. As the carriage moved off, she caught sight of my face at the window and nodded goodbye.

When I turned from the window, the two ladies were discussing Miss Vaughn.

"So that is the heiress who is to marry Gerald Old-

ridge?" said one. "She looks more like the bride of death. They would better be measuring her for her shroud. They say her aunt is anxious for her marriage with young Oldridge; he is her husband's nephew. I think it is a shame to let her marry in her condition, but they try to make her believe the sea trip will cure her. Doctor Michael told me positively that she could not live three months longer. Her lungs are nearly gone. Both he and Doctor Lewis saw her soon after she arrived and expressed the same opinion of her case to Mr. Oldridge. Of course, she was not told of it. They feed her up with hopes, but they know better."

"Certainly they do. But, you see, if she marries young Oldridge, her money goes into the firm. Mr. Oldridge has enlarged his business lately, and needs more capital, I suspect. The girl has nearly half a million in her own right. It will be a grand lift for the handsome Jerry. In three months he will be a rich widower. It's an awfully easy way to step into half a million of money. He can keep a stake in his uncle's business and turn his attention to the law besides. They say he has more taste for his father's profession than for his uncle's business. Oh, Mademoiselle Napeau, I wanted to ask you to design a tea-gown for me—something new—something that will suit my style. I am called picturesque by artists."

She turned her round, meaningless face and stuffy overlaced figure full upon Mlle. Nepeau. I did not smile to myself and repeat internally,

"Would some power the giftie gie us," etc.,

as I would have done under other circumstances. I was mechanically gathering up measuring-tape and pins, not knowing what I was doing, for a thought—a scheme had flashed into my mind and made a tumult there.

It was at this instant that the conception of my sin was born in my brain—born of the talk of those two women,

who little knew what a crime sprung from the seed of their idle gossip.

The wild and wicked thought was this: Why should not Gerald marry this dying heiress and inherit the splendid fortune? No one suspected his secret marriage. Besides ourselves, no one knew of it except my mother and the old minister who had performed the ceremony. No one would know. The girl, poor creature! would not be wronged; she would die without knowing the truth. As for me, I shivered at the thought of any other woman calling my Jerry husband. But this girl seemed hardly humanrather a spirit. It was impossible for a warm, red-blooded creature like me to be jealous of that shadowy being, who had been doomed by the judgment of two eminent doctors to die within three months. They had examined her; they had declared that her lungs were nearly gone. People could not live without lungs—that was a physical fact. She would die in three months, and her fortune would go to Gerald. He could then marry me openly. We could have a home with every comfort and luxury for ourselves and poor, worn, anxious mother; and Nell, who was so bright, could be well educated. Then I could have my husband to myself. No more lonely evenings, striving to put down jealous fears and envious longings. I could endure three months of absence and gloom for the sake of the brilliant future.

When this thought first darted across my brain I recoiled from it in horror—I smiled at its madness. But it came again and again, and each time it horrified me less. I made an effort to drive it off; I set my teeth in determination; I clipped the cloth I was cutting fiercely, as though it were the temptation that was assailing me. But all in vain. Each time it came it seemed more feasible and less revolting. At last it appeared to me a very natural and safe proceeding—the end justifying the means.

Gerald came to see me that night, and I related to him

the talk of the two women in Miss Nipper's reception-room.

The busybodies!" he said. "It is astonishing how much they pick up. Then they invent the rest, and retail the whole as gospel truth. No doubt their gossip made you feel badly, my darling. I want to make a confession now. I have not yet told Elsie that our boy and girl engagement must not be thought of. I have not had the courage. She is so frail, and she seems to cling to me so, to be so fond of me, just in the way she was when we were children. They say anything like a shock would kill her at once, and I am afraid it will be a shock to her to have me tell her that I can not keep that early promise. She will be sure to think it is because of her ill health, and she is so sensitive about her state. Like all invalids, she clings to hope. I wanted my uncle to tell her, but he refuses point-blank to do it, so I must take up the cross to-morrow. To tell the truth, I have been expecting she would get down in her bed for good every day. She has grown weaker since she came, but she insists it is because she has overexerted herself."

"You said you told your uncle—what did he say?"

"I told him this morning. He had a talk with me. He wanted that I should marry Elsie at once. It might benefit her health, he said. Love often worked wonders, but I felt sure it was because he was afraid she might die any day. He said she was evidently wrapped up in me, and fully believed that I would keep faith with her. He wanted us to marry and sail for Europe on the next trip of the 'Atlantic.' He was very angry when I told him I had no intention of marrying her. He insisted that I was bound to her in honor—that I had all along led her to expect I would keep the engagement our parents had made between us. He said it would be cruel, murderous, to throw her off now. The shock would kill her. She would be sure to feel that her delicate health was the cause, and

she would lose hope, which was the chief thing that sustained her—that and her love for me. She was trying so hard to live for my sake. This is what he said."

"There is truth and feeling in it," I answered. "It would be cruel, murderous, as he said, to tell her now while she is so weak."

"But don't you see, Hilda, that I must tell her, because she is expecting me to marry her before she sails for Europe, and my aunt and uncle are expecting it, urging it, telling all their friends that it is a settled thing. What must I do, my dearest? Set your fertile little brain to work and tell me the best way out of this miserable scrape."

I hesitated. I was silent, mustering resolution. Then I said slowly:

"The best way out is to do as they all wish and expect —marry Miss Vaughn."

"Hilda, I asked you an earnest question; I did not expect you to jest in reply," he said, in a vexed, disappointed tone.

"I am not jesting. I am speaking earnestly. We want money, Gerald—we can not do anything without it. We can not live this way. It is wearing me out. I grow more unhappy every day. I want to be your acknowledged wife, but I will not let you acknowledge our marriage while we have nothing to live upon. I will not have it said of Gerald Oldridge that his wife works in a dress-maker's shop to support herself. Miserably discontented as I am, I prefer this double life to the mortification of the other and the injury it will do your future prospects. What then? What is the remedy? Nothing but money. Marry this heiress; she will die in three months, and her money will make all things right with us."

"Marry her! Hilda, are you mad? I am already married—to you—"

"But no one suspects it. No one will ever know."

"My God, do you know that you counsel me to commit a crime that would make me a felon in the eyes of the law?"

"The law will never know it. No one will."

"I will know it, you will know it. I will know myself to be a perjured wretch, unworthy my own respect or yours."

"You would not lose my respect. I should feel that you had made a sacrifice for my sake. I should honor and admire you for it."

Great God! what demon in my breast made me utter those words with that persuasive smile—that tender touch of my arm about his neck!

He shook my arm off as though it had been a serpent. He got upon his feet and stood looking down at me.

"Hilda, how dare you tempt me so? You will repent this, believe me. You have put this thing into my head. I would give half my life if I had never heard those words from your lips."

He snatched his hat and rushed out of the room. I saw him no more that evening.

## CHAPTER VI.

It was the first night since our marriage that Gerald had left me without taking me in his arms and kissing me. I felt miserably about it. The sting of his last words brought bitter tears to my eyes as I lay awake in my bed. "I have fallen in his esteem," I said to myself.

Yet, oh! perversity of the heart into which the Tempter had entered, I did not relinquish the scheme that had revolted my husband. No, I held to it; I thought it over. It grew on me as I reflected upon it. It seemed not only possible, but feasible; not only expedient, but right. Yes, I reasoned myself into the belief that it was right. Where was the wrong in it? There was no wrong to Elsie. She

would never know that Gerald was not her true husband, and she would be content. By marrying her, Gerald would fulfill his father's wish, and would make Elsie happy during the short time she had to live.

There was no wrong to me, for I had consented to the sacrifice. The sacrifice would fall most heavily on me, but I could bear it for the sake of Gerald's future good. I arrogated to myself the part of martyr for the pain I must endure in giving up my darling, even for that short time, to another.

I could never do it if that other were more a flesh and blood woman and less a ghost. But I could not be jealous of this girl, with the stamp of death upon her wan brow.

Of course there would be a sacrifice on Gerald's part of his own feelings. Naturally, he would revolt from the deception that the act of marriage would involve; he would revolt from the close association with one he did not love. But he felt a sympathy, a pitying regard for Elsie Vaughn. He could be kind to her, watchful of her, constant in his attentions to her while her life lasted. He could be this to her, while he was loyal to me in every pulse of his being. He could be her companion, her watchful attendant, her nurse and comforter for three months; and after that—oh! after that—all would be clear. Gerald would be all mine; he could own me before the world; he could be independent of his uncle; he could pursue the career his talents marked out for him; he, and I by his side, could take the place in the world that was ours by right.

"Yes, it shall be," I said to myself. "Gerald shall consent. He shall marry Elsie Vaughn, and her money shall be his. I should be miserable to think he had lost so much because of me. I will make this sacrifice for his sake. It is not a sin. If it be I can not help it. Circumstances urge me to it, and the end justifies the means. Wrong or right—it shall be."

Then I crept back to bed. I silenced the inner voice that was feebly raised against my resolution and slept.

Everything that happened next day served to strengthen me in my resolve. Miss Nipper was cross, and my task in the trying-on room was more distasteful than usual. I had to endure the haughty superciliousness of women who thought me little better than the wooden models I hung dresses upon. On one occasion I was stung with the taunts of a woman whose money, mounting up into millions, could not buy her a handsome feature or a sense of true politeness. I was arranging the folds about the neck of a teagown we had made for her—a beautiful thing in Pompeian-red and cream—and she was noting the effect in the mirror. I suppose the sight of my younger and fairer face annoyed her. She turned to Miss Nipper and said, sneeringly:

"I will wait until your trying-on young woman has looked enough at herself. You should have a mirror for your work-women and another for ladies."

"Then there would be none for you, madame," I exclaimed, impulsively. The retort nearly cost me my place. The woman was furiously angry. Her fat face grew redder than the flowers in her hat. She uttered a tirade against the insolence of underlings. Miss Nipper apologized and I stood by pale and silent, but feeling my heart beat fast with indignation.

For Gerald, too, the day had peculiar trials. I had written to him in the morning to be sure to come that night, making my short note as kind and pleasant as possible, with no allusion to our little quarrel. I mailed the note as I went to my work. I felt sure he would come. I put on a fresh dress and some flowers, and gave him a smiling welcome when at length his step was heard in the hall and Nell flew to open the door and spring into his arms.

I saw at once there was a cloud on his face. He tried to

talk pleasantly with mother, and to tease and romp with Nell, as usual, but it cost him an effort, and he gave a sigh of relief when we were at last alone in the little room he had had so neatly fitted up.

I went to him and put my arms around his neck.

"You were late to-night," I said. "Were you busy, or did you forget to wind up your watch, as you sometimes do. Where is your watch—you are not wearing it to-night?"

He hesitated an instant, then he said:

- "I sold it."
- "Sold your father's beautiful old watch. Why did you do that?"
- "Because I needed the money. I borrowed some money a little while ago—borrowed it from a friend. He is himself in a strait just now, and I sold the watch and paid the loan—in part."

I was silent, remembering with a pang that the money was borrowed on my account, to keep us up during my mother's illness and my absence from Miss Nipper's. I went to a drawer and took out a little roll of bills. I had been saving every cent of my earnings over actual expenses for the last few weeks, but the sum was very small. I put it into Gerald's hands.

"Your watch only paid the debt in part," I said.
"This will make it smaller by a few dollars, and I will save more when I can."

He thrust the bills back into my hand.

"Hilda, do you think I would take a cent of your poor little earnings? I am ashamed that I have not yet been able to give you a summer outfit."

"I do not need any new clothes. I never go anywhere, and no one ever comes here—but you. I must even quit going out with you so much, for fear of scandal. Miss Nipper told me she had seen me with you several times, and warned me against going with young men—particu-

larly those above me in station. She said she could not have girls in her establishment that were not prudent."

I spoke with a hard, bitter calmness. The talk with Miss Nipper had been one of the day's evil happenings. Gerald's forehead contracted with pain. He started from his seat.

"Hilda," he said, "this is what I feared. Our marriage must be made public. You must not be subjected to suspicion; you must not lead this narrow, isolated life, without friends or acquaintances. You must take your true position."

"My true position! What would that be? How much better than it is now? Money gives position. I should only drag you down from your own position by letting it be known we were married. You would lose your place with your uncle and your chance for the future, and I would continue to be Miss Nipper's trying-on young woman—unless we concluded to starve all together. If you got admitted to the bar, what would be your chance of success encumbered with a family of three—your wife a dress-maker's assistant?"

He gave me a look full of helpless anguish. He walked to the mantel-piece and leaned his elbow upon it, his head dropped upon his hand. Presently I said:

"Never mind me just now, dear. Think about your present difficulty—that debt. Could you not get an ad-

vance on your salary from your uncle?"

"No," he answered, briefly. Then, after awhile: "I asked for an advance. I hated to do it, he has been so cold for the past few days. He refused to give it. He said he could not spare a dollar. I know this is so. I told you he had borrowed money at a high interest to enlarge his business. This cripples him, otherwise his prospects are bright. His business would bear still further enlarging if he had capital."

"And he expected to get that capital through you?"

" Yes."

- "And he is angry with you because you have disappointed him?"
- "Yes, and so is my aunt. I had a scene with them last night. I shall have to leave there. I shall have to get another situation—if possible."

"It will be hard to do that now, just as the summer is beginning."

He did not reply. He remained leaning on the mantelpiece, his head resting on his hand. Suddenly he turned to me and caught my hands in his.

"Hilda, tell me what to do," he said, his face working with pain and indecision.

I looked into his eyes for a minute. I knew that he would do what I urged. I was the stronger spirit. He was not fitted to cope with difficulties, unless I had bravely helped him. I might have done this. I might have said:

"Let us acknowledge our marriage and live together, work together, and trust and hope. Leave your uncle, enter the office of the lawyer, your father's friend; work your way up. We are young, we can afford to make haste slowly."

This was what I should have said at this moment of doubt and indecision. Gerald would have responded to it at once. I could have infused him with courage and hope. Oh, God! why did I not speak the right words at that supreme moment? They were in my heart; they were almost on my lips. A wild conflict raged within me for a moment, but the evil spirit was the stronger. When I spoke it was to say:

"There is but one way out of the difficulty, dear Gerald—but one way that has in it anything except crushing poverty and hopelessness. I told you of that way last night."

"Hilda, do you still wish me to commit that sin?"

"It is no sin. You do not wrong any one. The law

can not punish, for it will never know. Elsie Vaughn will feel no wrong, for she will never know of the relation between us. She can live but a few months, and after her death we will be married openly; we will be independent, rich, happy. You can give your time and talents to the profession you love. We will have our home, our friends. I will help you to win fame and to add to your fortune."

A light flashed over his face, then it clouded. He said,

bitterly:

"It is a fair superstructure you build on a foundation of dishonor. Yes, disguise it as you will, it is dishonorable. A man must sacrifice honor and principle, as well as feeling—he must be a deceiver, a hypocrite, a villain to do such a deed. I can't do it, Hilda!"

He walked away from me and went back to the mantelpiece.

I sat down and waited in silence.

I knew the struggle going on in his breast. I felt how it would end.

Again he wheeled around and came to me.

"You say you are willing I should take Elsie Vaughn as my wife?"

"Until her death—which will not be long—yes. I have consented to this. I have consented to sacrifice my feelings. The hardest sacrifice falls upon me."

"Hilda, do you understand that if I do this I must play the part of a husband to this girl—that I must take her to

my arms—that my kisses must be hers—"

"Hush!" I cried, with a passionate gesture. "I consent to it, but I do not want to think of it—I consent to it for your sake. True love does not shrink from sacrifice. I think of the future. I know you will be loyal, that your heart will be all mine, that you would not, can not, care for Elsie Vaughn. You will be kind to her, a faithful, gentle companion and friend. She will not want more. She is too ill to have any of the warmth of passion-

ate love in her veins, or to wish or expect to receive it. You must sacrifice your feelings, your prejudices, or principles, as they may be called; but how can you help it? Circumstances make fate for us. Fate presses you to this step. Better take it boldly, and Fate, that always rewards courage, will reward you with a solution of all your perplexities."

"Hilda, you tempt me beyond my strength," he said, looking at me, his beautiful eyes full of sadness and re-

proach.

I threw my arms around him and laid my head against his breast.

"You do not love me, or you could not ask me to do this thing!" he said, kissing me, but without warmth.

"Love you, my darling, my own beautiful dearest! I love you with all my soul!" I cried, pressing my lips to his face again and again, kissing his forehead, his perfectly molded chin, his neck, his mouth under the thick brown mustache.

His arm closed about me, his lips returned my kisses, but he murmured:

"Still you would give me up?"

- "Never, never. I would kill the woman who came between us. I do not give up one particle of you. You will be mine the same all the while and forever. I make the sacrifice for your sake—you make it for mine. We will love each other better for it when the short trial is over."
  - "Are you sure of that?"
  - "I am sure of it."

"And you will never regret it, never reproach me for it, never think of me as weak and as a hypocrite?"

"Never. How could I? I will always remember that it was I who urged you to the step, I who suggested it first. I can never reproach you. I will promise that—I will swear it."

"Then, Hilda, I will do as you ask."

I tightened the clasp of my arms about him and laid my lips to his. I had conquered. The promise was given. The act—nay, why not speak plainly?—the sin I had tempted him to commit would be done. Was I satisfied? No. For an instant I came near crying out: "No, no; I recall my words. I was not in earnest. I was only tempting you to try you." But I did not yield to the impulse; I did not again speak of the subject. It was settled—I could not retract. It would look childish, idiotic, after all my arguments and persuasions. Not a word more about it was spoken, until, as Gerald kissed me goodbye an hour past midnight, he whispered: "I will keep my promise." Then I knew that before we should meet again he would have spoken to his uncle and to Elsie, and all would be arranged.

## CHAPTER VII.

GERALD did not come to see me the following evening. He sent instead a basket of grapes and roses, and a short note that said:

"What you wished done has been done. May there never be cause to regret it. I will come to-morrow evening and tell you all. This evening I am to stay at home at my aunt's request and hear her niece play. I have paid her scarcely any attention."

I knew this was true. He had not taken as much notice of Elsie as was due to her—merely as the guest and relation of his uncle's wife. Nearly all the time he could spare from business and study was given to me. This must change. If Gerald was now formally betrothed to Elsie, he must show her the attention due a fiancée. I must not expect to have his company every evening. He must amuse Elsie—he must listen to her play, he must sit

by her and talk to her and hold her hand, and make his tones soft and sweet for her ear.

I grew sick at the mere thought. Every moment Gerald could spend with me had been precious to me. I did not want to be deprived of one of them. I tried to solace myself with the timely proverb, "One can't have his pie and eat it, too."

We—Gerald and I—could not have the fortune that would make us so happy without a sacrifice. And I had said I would not shrink from sacrifice.

Gerald met me on my way home the next afternoon at six. He went home with me and we had a simple little tea, and then, as the May evening was mild, with a glorious full moon, we took a long ride out to Harlem in a car, where we were the only passengers, as far as the elevated road could take us, and we had our talk. I was in a state of feverish excitement—half eager to hear that all was arranged, half miserably remorseful for ever having conceived this scheme and induced Gerald to enter into it.

I was morbidly anxious to know all that had been said and done.

"Tell me everything just as it happened," I said to Gerald.

"My aunt brought up the subject by coming to me before I left the house to go to my business, and asking if it was possible that I refused to keep my engagement to marry Elsie Vaughn. If I intended to act so dishonorably, she said, it would be better for me to say so at once, that Elsie might know what to expect. Also, it was certainly not in good taste, to say the least, for me to continue staying in the house where Elsie was a guest after acting in such bad faith toward her. I said I had no wish to act in bad faith to Elsie. The engagement was made when we were too young to have any feeling in the matter, and there had been no definite understanding since we had arrived at an age to know our own minds and hearts.

Elsie's health was so delicate I did not think she cared to marry. Then my aunt said that Elsie was a creature that lived upon affection. To be loved was as necessary to her as food and air. She had taken the loss of her mother sorely to heart. She was sensitive and shy, had been raised up in seclusion, and was attracted to but very few people. 'She has always loved you dearly,' said my aunt. 'She has kept your image in her heart, idealized by her romantic nature into something superhumanly noble and admirable. You can surely see in her eyes how attached she is to you. Her looks follow you everywhere like a devoted child's. A change comes over her face when you go away with a careless notice of her, and she watches for your coming. I have discovered that she is unhappy, because she fears you no longer care for her now that she is an invalid, and that you are wanting to be free of her, and feel bound to her only by duty. She has been trying to get up courage to tell you that you must not think she intends holding you to your promise. She will give you your freedom at once -if you desire it. All the same, it would be as cruel in you to take it as it would be unwise. It would break her heart. I will speak to her this evening,' was all I answered. After dinner my aunt left us alone in the music-room. She played for me as well as her frail strength would permit, and then we talked of our childhood and-of my father—and her mother. She told me she had a letter her mother had written to be given to me. She had not given it, and when I pressed her to know why she had not she said she had believed it would no longer signify anything to me. It was about the old boy and girl engagement between us—and that had no doubt passed out of my mind -or at least out of my heart. 'Has it passed out of your heart, Elsie?' I asked. She said nothing, her lids were cast down, and I saw that they trembled. Presently she lifted them and looked at me, and oh! Hilda, I saw that my aunt was right. The poor frail, dying child loves me

with all her heart. She tried to speak and couldn't for crying. She was so agitated, and her little hands so cold that I was frightened for her, and—"

"You put your arms around her and kissed her, and drew her head on your shoulder and told her you had not ceased to care for her, and that you were ready to fulfill the boyish pledge at any time that suited her," I said.

The words came clear and calm from my lips, but my hands under my wrap were clinched together in the effort to keep down the bitter feeling that rose in me. And yet, I said to myself, Gerald could hardly do less in acting out the part I had assigned him. And how could I be jealous of Elsie Vaughn—that specter of a girl who had only three months to live?

Yet I could not help saying, with a touch of sarcasm:

"You have carried out my suggestion so far fully—quite fully, I must say."

"If I had approached her in a formal business way she would have told me at once the engagement was broken off. She is proud, though her nature is so loving."

"Loving? I would never imagine that dead and alive creature had any love in her nature!" I exclaimed, impatiently.

He looked at me closely.

- "Hilda, you will never be able to stand this. You are angry and bitter this moment. Better end it here, and let me tell Elsie and my uncle to-morrow that I am already married."
- "No, no; indeed you shall not. It is too late now, and I am glad it is. Of course I shall suffer a little at first.—I can bear it—I will bear it. You acted just right. You only did as you ought. Go on—tell me what she said —when is the marriage to take place?"
  - "In one week."
- "One week?" I gasped. "One week! Well, I am glad there will be so short a time, for suspense is some-

thing harder for me to bear than crushing grief. How came you to settle upon so early a day?"

"My aunt and uncle came in while we were talking, and they settled it to suit their own convenience and Elsie's interest, as they said. My aunt wishes to shut up house and go to Europe for a month or two. Elsie's physician is urging her to take the trip, and to go by the first of June. The steamer they wish to sail upon leaves nine days from to-morrow."

"And you are going away—you are going with her! You are going to leave me! Oh, Gerald!"

I covered my face with my hands. He put his arm around me.

"Hilda," he said, "my going or staying rests with you. It is not yet too late. Say the word and I will unsay everything. I will tell them that I am already married."

"I will not be so weak," I cried. I dashed off my tears and shook back my hair with a gesture of decision. "No, I will not be so weak. But I never thought of your going away."

"I think it is better. You could not bear it if I stayed. Since it must be, it is better that I will be away until—until I am free to claim you."

"Yes, it is better," I admitted.

"But, Hilda, there is one thing. Suppose — suppose Elsie does not die. Suppose she does not die in the three months they have given her to live? I do not think she can survive that long; do you? One would not imagine she could live a month to look at her, and yet she has a great deal of vitality. Last night I was surprised at her animation. She played with spirit for awhile, and her eyes brightened. There was even a faint color in her cheeks."

"It was excitement—the hectic strength and glow that come to all consumptives when they are under the stimulus of excitement. You are quite sure Doctor McKenna said positively that she could live but a few months when you questioned him about her?"

"I am quite sure. Doctor McKenna knows of my engagement to Elsie. He attended her in Florida, where he spent last winter. He came with her to New York. He knew I wanted to be told the truth about the state of her health, and he gave me his candid opinion."

"Tell me his words! Repeat them to me again!"

"He said that whoever should marry Elsie Vaughn would marry a dying girl. He said he thought it his duty to tell me this. And now—he and all the world will look on my marriage as simply the heartless speculation of a fortune-hunter."

"It is no matter. Mercenary matches are made every day. They will soon forget how the money came. It would hardly do to look closely into the way most fortunes have been gained—the world never does."

"I shall always be a scoundrel in my own eyes," he said, bitterly, "and in yours, too, I fear."

"In my eyes you are all that is noble and dear. You are making this sacrifice for me. If it is a sin the sin is mine, and on my head let the punishment fall—on mine alone."

He looked at me with sad tenderness, and said, smoothing my hair with soft touches:

"Do not say that, my darling. No punishment, no pain could fall upon you alone while I lived. What gave you sorrow would bring unhappiness to me. We are one, Hilda, now and forever. And now, dearest, do not let us speak Elsie Vaughn's name, or think of her during this week any more than we can help. Let us think of each other, of the future—of our love and our hope—and try to be happy while we are together."

I did try. I summoned all the courage, all the will-power in my nature to bear me through this week of trial.

I would not let Gerald see in me a sign of weakness or faltering.

I knew it would be fatal to my plan. One symptom of regret or repentance on my part, and he would have retracted. He was on the verge of doing so again and again. He was so unhappy, so self-scornful. More than once he burst out in bitter sneers against himself—calling himself a hypocrite, a traitor; and declaring he could never go through with it. I met these outbursts calmly, and opposed them with the quiet steadiness of my stronger will—with the sweetness of persuasion and the soothing of love.

I had never been more attractive to him than I was that week. The fever of excitement within me gave a rich color to my clear cheeks and lips, and a brilliancy to my dark eyes. I called up all the power of charm and persuasion that was in me. My love for Gerald—the intense love of an impassioned nature—was increased by the thought that he was making a sacrifice of principle, of his cherished sense of honor and right, for my sake. And he was going away. I must lose him for weeks—for months. We, who had never been separated, must be parted by thousands of miles of land and ocean.

All this gave warmth to my kisses and passionate intensity to every look and tone. They helped to daze and bewilder Gerald, and to impel him on to do the thing I had desired—the act his more scrupulous and less lawless nature revolted against.

Excitement sustained me on its topmost wave that week. I was not cool enough to suffer. I was as eager as a gambler playing the last hand of a game on which he has staked everything.

The evening of the marriage came. It had been a clouded, gloomy day. I had gone home at noon, telling Mrs. Nipper I was ill.

"Indeed, I think you are in a high fever," she said, looking at my burning cheeks and dry, scarlet lips.

Gerald came to me in the afternoon. I was lying down on the lounge in our little room. Mother had been teasing me to take something. When she saw Gerald she said:

"Ah, here is Jerry. She will mind you, my son. I want her to go to bed and drink some Serky's tea; it will cool her blood. Her head is hot and throbbing. I think she ought to see a doctor."

"Leave me with Jerry; he is doctor enough for me," I said. "I want to talk to him, mother. He is going away, you know."

"Yes, that is what is the matter with you; I suppose he must go with his aunt, to keep on the right side of his uncle, but it seems hard to leave you behind."

"It is a question of finances," I said. "I will go next summer—when our ship comes in."

Mother knew not a word of the marriage that was to be to-night. She had no dream, dear innocent old soul, of the scheme that had formed in my brain, and that I had instigated Gerald to carry out. She would never know. She lived utterly out of the world. She never read the papers. She would never hear of Jerry's marriage with the rich consumptive young heiress until Elsie had met her doom and her fortune was Gerald's and mine.

When she had gone out, I rose up and put my arms around my husband's neck. I looked into his eyes; my own were shining through the mist of unshed tears.

"Oh, Jerry, tell me that you love me with all your heart, that you will love me forever, that nothing shall ever, ever come between us; swear it to me, Jerry."

"I do swear it, my darling! Hilda, a man could do no more for a woman than sacrifice his honor for her sake, as I am doing for you."

"Oh, Gerald, I wish I had-"

I stopped and checked back the utterance of that wish which had almost burst from my lips. Why did I do it? Even then it was not too late.

Gerald asked, eagerly:

"Do you wish you had never urged me to do this, Hilda? Do you want me to retract? I will do it, dearest. It is not too late. Something tells me this is a fatal step. I had a fearful dream last night."

"So had I. But dreams are nothing except a token of weakness. Only the strong—the bold—succeed. We must be strong. No, I do not repent. We are doing nothing criminal. The end justifies the means. It is all right. Only, only—oh, Gerald!—you must love me through it all. You must let this make no difference to you. It should make you love me better, for oh! I shall suffer—how I shall suffer! Do you realize it? You will be away; new scenes, novel situations, pleasant acquaint-ances, and the devotion of another woman will distract and interest you. I must stay here with the old surroundings, and think, and remember, and fear—perhaps doubt—even you. We can not master our own hearts, alas!"

"You must not stay here, dearest. You must take your mother and little Nell to the sea-shore or the mountains, and you must not let yourselves have fears or doubts. You can never doubt me, my darling wife. Every pulse of my heart is yours. I will write to you constantly, and you will send me long, sweet letters, and I shall soon return."

And so he soothed me, with his arms around me and mine about him, until it wanted but little more than an hour to the time of the ceremony that would—oh, strange, bewildering thought!—make him the husband of another woman.

"You must go," I said. "Don't let your heart fail you at the last moment," for he looked utterly wretched, and he had just said that he knew now how traitors feel when they sell their country or their friends for money.

When he was gone I pretended to my mother that I wanted to sleep, and she left me alone, keeping Nell also

out of my room. But I had no thought of sleep. I was wild with feverish restlessness. I wanted to see this marriage, or at least to see my husband's bride—to look at her again—and to assure myself of the fact that she was doomed—that she would not live three months. Three months! I felt myself madly longing that she would not live three weeks—three days. I hoped she would die on the trip across the ocean. Perhaps she would. Surely, when I saw her, she looked too frail to stand the ordeal of seasickness. Had she grown worse since then? Of course, since all her remaining life must be a slow growing worse as the fell disease progressed to the end.

But I wanted to see her—to see how she looked as a bride, to see how she looked beside my husband, and if she really loved him. How could such a spectral creature love?

How should I compass my wish to see the bride to-night and yet be myself unseen or at least unrecognized? I thought it over, and a plan came into my mind.

## CHAPTER VIII.

I would wear a disguise. In this way I would see my husband's bride, and she would never know that I was other than the grateful beggar I would represent, nor would Gerald recognize me if he should see me.

I knew Elsie Vaughn was charitable. One day, when I watched her from the window as she entered her carriage in front of Miss Nipper's, I saw her stop and speak to an Italian woman, a street singer, leading a blind old man who played an accompaniment on an asthmatic accordion, while she sung a ballad in her own tongue. Miss Vaughn, passing close to her, stopped and put money into her hand, and told her what she might take for the cough that broke into her singing. I heard the woman call down blessings upon her in broken English.

I would disguise myself to look like that Italian street singer. It was easily done. Our closet of cast-off clothing would furnish a faded red shawl to wear over my head, a dark stuff skirt, a black bodice. A worn front of irongray hair of my mother's could be put over my own curling hair, and I could make up my face with an umbertinted wash and some pencil lining.

Fifteen minutes sufficed to get myself disguised. After I had put on the clothes, and darkened my face, and made my eyebrows black and heavy with a touch of burned cork, I shaded hollows in my cheeks and drew pencil lines about my mouth, as I had seen amateur actors do when making up to look old. Then I put the faded red shawl over my head with its front of smooth, iron-gray hair, and pinned it under my chin. I drew my face down into a melancholy length, dropping the corners of my mouth, and looked in the glass. I was a middle-aged Italian woman—a beggar with a visage as doleful as my songs.

I slipped out of the room, unseen by my mother and Nell, who may have been asleep in their beds. I crept down the flights of dark stairs and stepped out upon the street. The fresh air felt good to my burning head. At first I hesitated and looked about me timidly, feeling strange in my queer disguise. But no one seemed to notice me, and as I walked along in the stream of passers I lost all apprehension of being found out. I would have enjoyed the sense of changed identity but for the active and urgent purpose that quickened my steps.

As I passed Sixth Avenue and hurried up Fourteenth Street, I glanced up at the tall clock on the sidewalk. Its hands pointed to half after eight. At nine the marriage would take place. I might still be there in time to prevent it if I wished. Did I wish it? Did I wish to save my husband from an act that I had prompted—nay, urged upon him? Did I wish to save his honor and my own happiness? Yes, for I would be the most miserable wretch on

earth this night to know that he held another woman in his arms. I could not bear it—no, not for all the money on earth.

"Undo your evil work." A voice inside me said the words as plainly as though they were uttered into my ear. A strong, sudden impulse to do as it commanded seized upon me. For a moment 1 stood still and struggled against it. But the voice within seemed to press against my heart, making it stand still and listen as it spoke:

"Go to your husband. It is not yet too late. Tell him to retract—to do as his sense of right and honor prompted—acknowledge his marriage to you. Save him from this crime against the law of his land, this wrong to an innocent girl, this wrong to himself and to you. It is your work. Go quickly and undo it."

I glanced again at the clock. Three minutes had passed. I could not walk to the house on Madison Square in time. But there was a cross-town car. Ah! here it came. I saw its blue light nearing me. I signaled it; it stopped, and I got in. Away we rattled rapidly, for the car was nearly empty. Yes, I would be in time.

As I sunk back, with a sigh of relief, the car stopped suddenly. I looked out and saw other cars standing still on the track. I heard the piff! piff! of fire-engines and knew what was the matter even before the driver, turning round, said:

"There's a fire on ahead, in the next block, and an engine hose is across the track."

I got out at once, but I felt that the delay was fatal. I would not be in time. Was it providential? Was it for good—or evil? Who can tell what Fate intends? Everything is ordered; everything works out to accomplish inevitable destiny.

A crowd had collected on the sidewalk in front of the store that was on fire. I had to make my way through the mass of men and boys, with here and there a woman of

the class that hail such opportunities to show their painted charms. A man here and there spoke to me in a boisterous or jeering way as I pushed past him. I paid no heed to it. Only one burning thought consumed me: "I shall be too late!"

At last I reached the street. I was panting with exhaustion as I peared the house. Gerald had said the wedding would be almost private, but there were half a dozen carriages in front of the house. The lower story was brilliantly lighted, as could be seen through the half-opened windows and gauzy curtains.

When I came in sight of it, I heard the sound of music played upon a grand piano very rich and strong in tone. It was the "Wedding March" from Mendelssohn. My heart throbbed nearly to bursting, and I tried to quicken my steps. But the music stopped before I came in front of the lighted house. Some street idlers were leaning upon the iron railing of the narrow grass-plots on either side the marble steps. One of them, evidently a servant-girl, said to her companion:

"The ceremony's begun. The couple is standin' in front of the big bow-window that's all banked up with flowers and palm-trees. I saw it to-day, when I was help-in' Susan."

"Hush! you can hear the parson marryin' 'em,' said the man she had spoken to.

You could hear him, indeed. Through the partly open window, with its half-drawn blinds and light curtains, you could hear almost every deep-toned word of that marriage ceremony. I listened only an instant as I came up breathless to the railing. Then I sprung up the steps and pulled the handle of the bell. There was no response. The door remained closed. The servant that attended on it was evidently looking on from the hall-door at the drama going on in the parlor—the always absorbing drama of a marriage.

I gave the handle of the bell another violent pull. This time, after a little delay, the door was opened. The grum, displeased face of a pompous English butler appeared at the door. Seeing me, his grum expression changed to an angry scowl.

"Get away from this-we don't want no beggars here!"

he said, and shut the door in my face.

I felt I had made a mistake in coming in this disguise. I would be refused admittance. Oh! already it was too late—too late to save my husband from public shame and disgrace and punishment. The window, open at the top, was close to me as I stood on the steps. As the door was slammed in my face, I had turned to the window with the impulse to try to reach it—to beat upon the panes of glass, and cry out: "I forbid this marriage!" But there was an instant cessation of the deep, priestly tones, and then Gerald's voice, saying, "I will."

Oh, God! it was too late. If I spoke now, what a dreadful blow would fall upon that beloved one—what a deathblow of disgrace, of punishment by law—what a ruin of all his prospects for the future! No, I could not speak. It must go on now—this crime that I had instigated—it must go on to the end. The marriage was already a terrible reality; Elsie Vaughn was Gerald's wife in the eyes of the world—I was nowhere in their knowledge, and I could not speak. It was my own sin. I had forced this miserable issue.

I felt it to be a miserable one now; the veil of glittering delusion was rent before my eyes. And yet all might be well—all would be well most probably. This girl was doomed; she would soon die, and my husband be given back to me—mine only. Already I had ceased to think about her fortune—or, rather, it had ceased to be the center of my thoughts, the absorbing purpose of my soul, as it had been for days and weeks. That purpose was accomplished; the fortune was Gerald's—his and mine. Ah!

not yet; Elsie Vaughn's life yet stood between. Elsie Vaughn herself was the torturing reality in my thoughts at that moment. She had come between me and the sole possession of the man who belonged to me by law and by love. True, she was a mere shade of a woman—a spectral shadow that would soon pass. How soon? I must know—I must see her this night.

The wedding-march was being played again. Mockingly it sounded in my ears. I rose from the step and again rang the door-bell. The pompous servant opened it, and I sprung from the shadow into the space between the half-opened door before he could shut it in my face.

"I am not here to beg," I said, putting a piece of money into his hand. "I am a poor woman that Miss Vaughn once befriended. I have brought her a little wedding-present."

"Give it to me then. I will take it to her," he said, somewhat mollified, holding out a white-kidded hand.

"No, I want to give it to her myself. She will not refuse to see me. Ask her to come here just one moment."

"Cawn't do it. She's a-receiving the corngratilations of her friends. She wouldn't see the likes of you for all your trumpery present. You cawn't try your begging schemes on me."

The insolent varlet once more slammed the door in my face.

What should I do? I must see Elsie Vaughn this night. I must see if indeed she looked like the bride of death—if she looked more or looked less ghastly than when I saw her last. Anything was better than suspense.

I went slowly down the steps. As I approached the group that still hung upon the front railing, one of the girls said:

"Why don't you go round the back way if you want to see the servants. You're a fortune-teller, aren't you? We'll go down presently and have our fortunes told. Go round there to that basement door and ring. They'll let you in. Come, I'll go with you. I'm 'quainted with the cook, and the head-waiter, and Miss Vaughn's own maid."

I followed her around to the small door on the ground-floor that gave entrance to the servants' apartments. She rang, and the door was opened at once. There was quite a little company in the small sitting-room. A wedding always attracts guests below-stairs as well as above. Here were the smart-looking coachmen of the carriages outside drinking a pot of beer with the chamber-maids and cooks, while their horses were left in charge of a footman or a hired boy. Several of the company had just entered from above and were telling about the marriage which they had seen through the drawing-room doors as they stood in the hall.

One very pretty girl, with dark creole eyes and skin, was saying:

"I was inside where Mrs. Oldridge made me stand against the wall, not far from Miss Elsie, ready with camphor and smellin' salts if she should faint. We was awfully afraid she'd faint, but Lor', she stood up like a hery-uine, and I heard her say 'I will' as plain as could be."

"She looks dreadful pale and peeked, though," said a young man. "They say she's as good as a dead girl."

"I don't believe it. She's stronger'n she was two weeks ago. I ought to know. I dresses her every day and sees her constant. She ain't goin' to die and leave Mr. Gerald. She loves him too much. Love's better than physic any day. It's my belief she'll get well right along in spite of the doctors."

Her words went to my heart like poisoned arrows. I felt myself trembling. The words of the fat cook were a straw of comfort.

"There ain't no cure for consumption, and that's what she's got. The doctors said so. Consumption is a powerful deceivin' complaint. Tain't no sign because she looks

better and seems like she's stronger. It's nothing but the excitement."

I went up to the dark girl. "You are the bride's own maid?" I said. "She was kind to me. I want to see her, to give her these roses and thank her."

"I'll take them to her," said the girl.

"No. I want to see her myself. I can tell by looking at her if she will live and be happy. I want to give her the flowers and my blessing. Can't you take me upstairs, and let me stand at the end of the hall—and ask her to see me a moment—the woman that sung in the streets, and had the blind father? I don't want a cent from her. I only want to give her the flowers—and my blessing."

"If I get you a-speaking with her, will you tell my fortune? You're a fortune-teller. I know by your looks.

Aren't you?"

"I'll tell your fortune, my pretty girl—yes, and welcome, if you'll let me see the bride just a minute."

"It's a bargain; I'll try. Be sure to tell me a good fortune," she said. "Come, follow me. You can stand at the head of the stairs while I speak to her."

She ran upstairs, and I followed her. She left me standing in the shadow at the head of the basement stairs. She was gone but a minute or two. When she returned I saw behind her the white-robed and veiled figure of the bride. My heart stood still as she came near, for she was leaning on Gerald's arm. I drew the faded shawl further over my face. The light in this corner was dim. How thankful I was for that! Before she reached me, Elsie took her hand from Gerald's arm, and whispering something to him, left him standing in the hall. Probably she was afraid I might break out into praises of her liberality or that I might put something coarse into my congratulations, after the manner of the class to which I was supposed to belong.

She came up to me—the girl who had just married my husband—the girl whose face I searched so eagerly, hoping

to find speedy death written there. Was it the dim light or the shading of the lace veil that made her cheeks and her temples look less hollow than when I had seen her last in Miss Nipper's trying-on room?

Ah, how I had exulted that day over the emaciation of the figure I was fitting—the hollows between the shoulders, the wasted arms, the bones that almost showed through the thin pearly skin of her neck and shoulders! She had come nigh fainting that day while her dress was being tried on. I had supported her a moment, and felt, with a strange mixture of pity and satisfaction, how light she was —a mere child's weight.

Surely she had improved. It could not all be dress and excitement. Her cheeks were fuller, her eyes brighter, her lips—could that be an artificial color that stained those sweetly chiseled lips? As I gazed at her the conviction flashed upon me that if this girl were in health she might be almost lovely. Her features are pinched and sharpened, but they are not misshaped.

She felt my keen, scrutinizing look. A faint color fluttered into her cheek.

"You wanted to see me?" she said.

I made an effort and recovered myself.

"I wanted to see you, kind signora, on your weddingnight, and give you these roses with my best wishes for you to be happy and blessed by the holy mother Mary."

The flowers almost dropped from my hand as I suddenly remembered that I called down a blessing of happiness upon the woman I wished might fall dead at my feet.

I would have recalled it if I could. It was too late. She had taken the flowers and was praising their beauty, thanking me, and asking after my blind father. I murmured something, I did not know what, and then she said, "I would like to send a little present to your father, but my purse is upstairs," and then turning round she called to Gerald: "I claim a wifely privilege early," she said,

laughing. "I want you to give me a little money to send this poor woman's father."

- "No, no; I want no money," I said, hurriedly. "Goodbye, signora," and I rushed down the stairs before Gerald could come near.
- "You great silly! Why didn't you take the money?" said Elsie's maid. "She's got plenty of it, and she'll put it out on him like water, for she loves the very ground he walks on. And why didn't you tell her fortune? She'd like to have you tell it if it was like the one the 'strologer Homan told her."
  - "What was it—what did she tell her?"
- "Oh, 'twas good! She was going to marry soon—going to marry a fine man that would love her—and she would get well, and have a nice girl-baby. Wasn't that good? Now give me as good a fortune—come!"

She seized my arm and drew me into the circle of beer-drinkers about the table.

- "I can not; I am no fortune-teller. I must go!" I cried, trying to free myself.
- "But you promised—you know you did. I won't let you off; I know you are a fortune-teller."
  - "Don't let her off; she promised!" cried the others.
- "Give me your hand, then. Here, let me see. Beware of discontent. Let well enough alone. Don't be covetous of money. Don't urge your lover to do things that are unlawful and wrong, for the sake of money. If you do, you will lose him, lose your happiness, and find misery and ruin."

I dropped the shapely dark hand and made my escape. She followed me outside.

- "You are a true gypsy. You knew what you were talking about. I've been encouraging my boy to buy lottery-tickets and to play cards for money, because I wanted to be rich. I won't do it any more."
  - "Don't," I said. "I knew a woman who made her

husband play for high stakes. He won them; but she lost him—lost everything. She is the most miserable woman under the heavens to-night."

Yes, I had made my husband play for this high stake. He had won; but what would come? How was it to end? In misery to both of us, I feared. Yes, to both, for Gerald loved me. He would never love Elsie. But if she should live— Oh! but she would not live; I would not let myself think such a thing. She was too frail. Of course she looked her best to-night. Any woman, even a dying one, would have a little life and brightness on her weddingnight, particularly if she married Gerald Oldridge. How handsome he looked in his bridegroom's dress! Pale, certainly, with an abstracted, anxious look in his beautiful eyes, but I knew what that meant. He was unhappy, my poor Jerry. His notions of honor were keener and more sensitive than mine; his nature was as law-abiding and conventional as mine was lawless and bohemian. It had cost him a struggle to yield to my overbearing will, my constant, insidious persuasions. He was remorseful and unhappy. He felt he had dishonored himself—his grand old family name. Oh! what had I done? I must have been mad. Some demon had possessed me for awhile, body and soul. I believe such things can be.

The demon possessed me still; for all kinds of horrible torturing thoughts racked me that long sleepless night. I did not go to bed—I did not even undress. I walked the floor of my room all night, execrating my folly, striking my forehead with my clinched fist, and breaking into tearless sobs, as I pictured my Jerry with that girl's head upon his breast. Oh, how I cursed myself, how I hated her! Yet I had blessed her to-night when I gave her the flowers. I wished that my tongue had been palsied before it uttered that blessing. Oh! if the flowers had only been poisoned, as was that bouquet given to the French king as he sat with La Pompadour! If there had been a drop of prussic

acid in the heart of those roses when she buried her face among them!

I was a murderer in heart that night. I could have killed Elsie Vaughn—the most innocent of God's creatures. Yes, surely a demon held possession of me.

## CHAPTER IX.

As day was breaking I threw myself on the bed without undressing and slept the sleep of utter exhaustion.

The sun was shining brightly in my window when I woke. It was past seven o'clock. Gerald would be here at nine. He would come as soon as he could. He must not suspect the struggle I had had—the agony of last night. He would think me weak. I would lose my power over him. He must not see that I repented of what I had done. It would do no good. It was too late now. What was done could not be undone without disgrace and the brand of a prison upon my husband through my own sin.

It was done, and now there was no alternative but to carry it through. He must go abroad with Elsie. It was better, as he had said. I could not bear it if he stayed. She would die abroad. He would return and claim me openly. Oh, I must be hopeful! I had let myself be too despairing last night. Jerry must never know how weak I had been. A man who is himself inclined to be weak will forgive everything else in a woman. What does Mephistopheles say to Faust? "Be wicked, but don't repent. I know of no more mawkish thing than a devil who repents." I had done a wicked thing, and now I would stand by it stoutly.

I looked in the mirror of my pretty dressing-case and saw myself pale and haggard. This would never do. Jerry must see me fresh and blooming and vigorous—an utter contrast to that pale, lifeless creature he would pres-

ently leave to come to me. 1 must make a change in my looks before he came.

Dear little Nell came in with my breakfast.

"I knew you was sick, Hilda," she said. "I came in here this morning early, and you was lying across the bed with your clothes on. I put a shawl over your feet, and then I went and made you some nice hot tea with lemon in it, and some toast and an omelet. You must eat, and you'll feel better."

I kissed her innocent rosebud lips with a keen sense of my unworthiness, and let her arrange the little breakfast on a table while I bathed my face. Then I drank the hot tea and eat what I could, and felt more refreshed and ready to dress to receive Gerald.

I combed and curled my hair, then I dipped a rose-red ribbon into cologne and rubbed it upon my pale cheeks till they took an artificial bloom. A glass of wine brightened my eyes, and I felt I might venture to wear the matinée of pale-pink challie he had never seen. I put it on. It had delicate ruffles of lace at throat and wrists.

"You look like a flower—like a whole stalkful of pink hyacinth flowers, Hilda," Nell exclaimed. "Jerry won't go away and leave you to-day. He can't. He will take us all with him."

"Not this time; we will go with him next year—all of us," I said. "Run, now, and put on your white dress before he comes."

I walked the floor, listening for his step, watching the hands of my little clock.

"Oh! he is lingering a long time with his bride," I cried, bitterly; though it was not yet nine o'clock.

Two minutes later I heard this step upon the stairs. I met him at the door, and threw myself on his breast. He put his arms around me and kissed me. His lips were cold; was it from the kisses of his spectral bride?

I drew myself from his passive embrace and looked at

him. He was pale. His eyes fell as they met mine. He had a dejected, almost crushed look.

"Hilda," he said, huskily, "I feel like a criminal."

"You are no criminal," I cried, cheeringly. "Don't think so. If there is any crime it is mine. Don't be so weak, dearest. What is done is done. Because of it do not live a coward in your own esteem—"

I stopped, suddenly remembering that I was repeating the words of the wicked wife of Macbeth—that ambitious queen who persuaded her husband to a deed that wrought woe and downfall to both.

He recognized the involuntary quotation.

"Oh," he said, quickly, "would to God I could answer you, as I might have done yesterday, in Macbeth's words:

"' I dare do all that may become a man, Who dares do more is none."

I have done what does not become a man, even as Macbeth did in the end, and I must now say, with him:

"'I have done the deed;
I am afraid to think on what I have done."

"And I must say to you, still in Lady Macbeth's words:

" Consider it not so deeply."

"How can I help it? That poor, deceived girl! If she but knew—"

"And if she did know," I cried, impatiently, "she would not suffer as I do in this sacrifice of my feelings—my wifely rights. She would not suffer, because she could not. Sickly and thin-blooded, she can not know what love is or the suffering that love brings."

"She does know what love is, Hilda," he said, looking at me with sad earnestness. "That poor girl loves me. I never dreamed how much until an hour ago!"

"What happened then to make you know? Tell me."

"It does not matter. I had no business to speak of it," he said. "Come here and sit on my knee, Hilda."

- "Tell me what happened this morning to make you know that this dead-and-alive girl could feel such an emotion as passionate love. Tell me everything just as it happened. There has got to be perfect confidence between us. If you are going to have concealments from me so early in the day, what will it be after awhile? Tell me what it was. Why do you hesitate?"
- "Only because I thought it would give you pain, dear Hilda."
- "Concealment, deception give me worse pain than anything. Let there be truth and openness between us two at least."
- "I will tell you, then. This morning, after I had left our room for awhile, I went back into it. She was kneeling, dressed in her white cashmere morning-gown by the bed. She rose up as I opened the door and came to me. 'I was thanking God for my happines,' she said, 'for His goodness in giving you to me. Oh, my darling! I have loved you all my life. I hardly dared hope you would care for me. I had given up life—and you. Your love has brought me back from the very gates of death—as Robert Browning's love brought Elizabeth Barrett back from the brink of the dark river. Do you remember where she tells this in those exquisite sonnets written to Robert Browning —the loveliest love songs that ever came from a poet's heart? Shall I read you one of those sonnets? They seem to be written for me. It will tell you better than I can how I feel to you."

Then she took up a little volume from the table and read the sonnet she had alluded to.

"Here is Elizabeth Browning's poems. Read that sonnet," I said, and gave him the book. This was the poem he read. I will remember it—and loathe it—all my life: "My own beloved, who has lifted me
From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown,
And in betwixt my languid ringlets blown
A life-breath, till my forehead hopefully
Shines out again, as all the angels see,
Before thy saving kiss. My own, my own,
Who camest to me when the world was gone,
And I, who only looked for God, found thee.
I find thee. I am safe, and strong, and glad
As one who stands in dewless asphodel,
Looks backward on the tedious time he had
In the upper life. So I, with bosom swell,
Make witness here between the good and bad,
That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well."

"And what did she do after she had read this poem to you?" I asked.

Every syllable was torture, but I would spare my heart no pang. I would know all.

"Hilda, why do you want to know? I can see this hurts you."

" Go on."

"She laid down the book and came to me and put her arms round my neck. She looked up into my face, and said: 'You have given me life, through your love, my beloved. And this life you have given belongs to you—all to you. Every heart-throb is yours. I am so glad I have money, that it may help you. It is all yours. I will gain strength and health that they may be yours—to give you grateful service, and make your life happy.' Her eyes were full of tears as she ended and dropped her head upon my breast. Hilda—''

A groan burst from my lips. A hand seemed wringing my heart—wringing the life-blood from it. I could see that picture—the girl, so pure, so impassioned, in her white robe, with her arms about her husband—my husband—her eyes lifted to his, her lips saying: "You have

given me life, my beloved: the life you have given belongs all to you."

Given her life! What business had she with life? How dared she deceive the world, pretending to be a dying girl? And now she spoke of life! Her life must be my death the death of my hopes—of my happiness!

I must have looked ghastly in spite of my false color, for

Gerald came to me and took me in his arms.

"My darling," he said, kissing me, "you would make me tell you. Why did I allude to it? It was cruel-use-

less. No need for you to know."

"I must know," I said. "I must know everything. So she loves you! Well, that is not to be wondered at. She can not love you as I do. And she is deceiving herself, as all consumptives do. She will not live. Do you think there is any probability of her living, Gerald?"

"I do not know. She looks very frail, yet-"

- "Yet? What do you mean? Is she not growing gradually worse?"
  - "I do not see that she is worse."

"Is she better? Do you think she is better? Tell me."

"I can not say she is; but she is a little stronger, and 1 think she has gained in flesh within the last two weeks."

"Great Heaven! why did you not tell me! Oh, you have deceived me!"

"Deceived you, dearest Hilda? I did not deceive you. I have always tried to make you feel that there might be a possibility of her recovery. But I noticed no sign of improvement until lately-until last evening indeed."

"It was only the excitement. She was buoyed up by it. It will not last. Consumptives have these intervals when they seem to be rapidly improving. But her physician the one who knew her in Florida, was it not?-told you that she had consumption and could not live."

"He told me that several weeks ago."

"You imagine there may have been a change since then.

Gerald, tell me—be frank with me, for God's sake!—do you think Elsie Vaughn will get well?"

"No, Hilda. It seems hardly possible. She is so frail

—so emaciated."

- "Oh, you give me hope! I believe all will be well. She will not last long. Perhaps she will die on the way across the ocean."
  - "Hilda!"

I looked at him. He was pale, and his eyes had a pained, stern expression.

"It seems horrible to hear you talk so about that poor girl," he said.

A spasm of jealousy contracted my heart.

- "You pity her, and pity may merge into love. Oh, Gerald, if you should come to love her!"
  - "That is absurd, Hilda. You know it is."
  - "Swear to me that you will never love her."
- "I can swear it heartily. I can love no woman but you, Hilda, my wife. Would to Heaven this dreadful thing had never been done. I was afraid you would feel so about it. I warned you."
- "Oh, I know you warned me! You did everything to dissuade me. It is my doing, but I meant it for good, and I believe it will end all right, and we will soon be reunited and happy. But, Gerald, if she should live—if she should bid fair to live for any length of time, promise me you will leave her and come to me. Swear it to me."
- "I swear it, Hilda. I will leave her now. I will go straight to her and tell her all if you wish it."
  - "No, no. That would ruin you."
  - "And ruin her, poor innocent girl," he said, sadly.
- "Still sorrowing for her sake," I thought, but I would not speak the words. I would not reproach him on this last day when he would be with me for so many long dreary days and weeks. "Let us talk no more about it. All will come out right, I feel sure," I said. "Now tell

me your plans for your tour. I am so glad you are to have this little trip. It will benefit you so much. See all you can, improve all you can, lay in ever so big a stock of knowledge and foreign polish, and then come back and impart some of it to your little wife."

I nestled my head under his arm, and he drew me close and kissed me many times upon my curly hair, my forehead, my lips and eyes, murmuring tenderly:

"Darling little wife-dearest Hilda."

"You are very sure I will always be dearest?"

"As sure as I am that my heart is beating against yours. You fill all my heart, Hilda. There is no room for any other."

This logic seemed conclusive. Alas! I had never studied the mysteries of the male heart—its capacity I did not then know.

"I shall keep your image always with me—just as you look now, sweetest, in this pretty pale-pink gown, like the rose's most curled and hidden leaf, with your sweet eyes misty and soft with sadness and tenderness."

He never asked if I would keep his image in my heart during our absence. I have noticed that a man, after the pursuit of a woman has ended in possession, is seldom so anxious and uneasy about her constancy as she is about his. He is more trustful, or more indifferent—which is it? Gerald had not the slightest doubt of the faithfulness of my affection. It was a tacit tribute to its strength and intensity.

He stayed with me until noon. His vessel was to sail at five o'clock, and he had many small matters to attend to. He went away promising to come in the afternoon to say good-bye.

He came again at half past three. He looked tired and worn and anxious, but he was all tenderness. He put a purse and a check-book into my hand. I opened the book

and saw my own name—my maiden name—on its initial page.

"I have placed a thousand dollars in the National City Bank on Fourteenth Street in your name, Hilda," he said. "Draw on it for whatever you need. There are two hundred dollars in the little purse."

I looked down at the money. A sense of guilt stung me to the quick. I felt as a murderer must feel when he first touches the money for whose sake he has committed the crime.

Purse and bank-book fell from my hand.

"I can't take the money, Gerald-her money."

His face darkened.

"Hilda, what do you mean? Was it not for her money that I did what I have done at your instance? It was for the good it would do you that I consented. And now you refuse to take it! Then I—"

"No, no," I interrupted. "It was only a passing scruple—a foolish one. I will take the money, and put it to good use, dear Gerald."

"Yes, you must not return to Miss Nipper's. Go to the mountains or the sea-shore with your mother and Nell, and recruit—build up your health and spirits."

"And study and improve myself that I may not be too far behind my traveled liege lord," I answered. "Yes, I will read, and study French, and cultivate my voice."

"That is right. You will be too bewitching by the time I return. Keep me constantly informed as to your progress, lest it overpower me when I come."

"I will write every day. My letters will be following you around over all Europe. And I shall expect a daily letter. You must not disappoint me."

"If you are ever disappointed, it will not be my fault," he said, tenderly.

He was in his dark-gray traveling suit. How handsome

he looked! His pallor and the tired, sad expression in his eyes only gave him a more soulful charm.

He took an affectionate leave of my mother and Nell. They thought he was going to Europe on business. They knew nothing of the marriage to Elsie Vaughn. They promised him to take good care of me and of themselves, and he promised to send them souvenirs of the lands he would visit. Then we had our good-bye—alone in our little room. How we clung together! We had never been separated a day since our marriage.

"Don't cry so, dearest," he said. "It will only be a

little while before I hold you to my heart again."

"But will your heart be the same, the very same to me?"

"The same, Hilda; how could I change to you?"

Alas! alas! who can answer for his own heart? We do not know ourselves. We never know. Experience does not teach us. We are not able to tell what we may do under certain circumstances—how we may stand the test of certain temptations.

## CHAPTER X.

This was not my last sight of Gerald that day. I put a thick veil over my face and went down to the pier to see the steamship take her departure. I stood outside on the pier when the splendid vessel moved away.

Standing on the deck, waving good-bye to the friends who had come to see them off, I saw "the bridal party" —my husband and his bride. They stood close to the rail. Her hand was on his arm, and she leaned upon him and looked into his face. I watched them as long as I could distinguish their figures. I borrowed a glass from an old sailor and watched them through it. I saw him put his arm around her waist. My head swam around, a haze came over my vision, I clung to the railing for support.

It was in vain. I felt my senses going; my fingers relaxed their hold, and I sunk down unconscious.

The unconsciousness lasted but a moment. I opened my eyes, and my first glance encountered a pair of eyes close to me. Were they eyes? In that instant of half-consciousness they seemed two individually alive intelligences—evil intelligences—piercing into the depth of my being to read the evil there.

They held me spell-bound. I lay in the man's supporting arms for half a minute, without any more power to move than a squirrel has when a snake throws a coil about it and looks at it with raised head and glittering eyes. I noted every characteristic of the face bent over me—a strong-featured, sallow face—the mouth hidden by a redtinted black beard—the broad, low, sallow brow deeply lined—the nose hooked, the chin finely molded, the neck long and slight, the shoulders slightly bent over.

But the eyes—they were the most remarkable feature of this uncommon-looking face. They were small, with thick lids, that you felt could droop over and hide their expression when he wished to hide it. That expression was intense—so concentrated that, as I said, the eyes impressed you as separate intelligences. The color was peculiar. It was green—the green of sea-waves when the yellow light of a storm-boding sunset glimmers upon them.

I saw all these characteristics in the time it takes the pulse to throb once. I had a sudden feeling, as though this man was to influence my life in some evil way—a feeling of repulsion—and yet a sense of being controlled—of being mastered in spite of myself.

I felt that his eyes were probing me—searching through mine to read the soul within. I tried to make an effort to move, to free myself from his support; but for half a minute my will seemed paralyzed. He saw it—or I fancied he did—for his eyes twinkled as though with a gleam of satisfaction,

With a sudden strong effort I threw off the momentary spell, and freed myself from his support.

I looked around more than half bewildered. I saw the railing of the pier—the stretch of sea glimmering in the afternoon sun—far off the receding bulk and trailing smoke of the steamship that was carrying Gerald and Elsie away. My head swam once more; the swish of the waves against the pier seemed to sound above me. I tottered and caught the railing for support.

"You are still too faint to stand; lean on me," said the

stranger.

I absolutely started at the sound of his voice. It seemed impossible that a man who looked like that could have a voice so sweet, low, penetrating. Yet in its sweetness there was a sort of hiss that made me think of his serpent eyes.

"I will be better immediately. The heat of the sun made me a little faint—that is all," I said, as quietly as I could.

A faint satirical gleam lighted his eyes. I felt sure that he did not believe it was the heat of the sun that had affected me. He had stood near me and had watched me gazing after the steamship. I had thrown up my veil as soon as the distance of the vessel made it impossible for me to be recognized by Gerald. He had read anguish and passion in my face. I remembered seeing him standing there. He had worn gold eye-glasses then; they hung now from a fastening in his black coat. He did not need glasses to help the vision of those supernatural eyes.

I pressed my hand to my forehead to try and collect my scattered senses. Then I knew for the first time that my head was bare, and the wind was blowing my loose hair about my face. I looked around for my hat, and saw it in the hand of the stranger. He smiled and nodded; then, as though he did not see my hand outstretched for the hat, he put it on my head himself, gathering the mass of hair

together so gently and in a way so quiet and matter-of-fact that it was impossible to resent the act that might have seemed officious in another. I could only murmur:

"Thanks; now I will go. I am strong enough to walk."

"No, you are not strong enough to go alone. Take my arm. I will call a carriage when we reach the street."

There was something compelling in his low utterance. I could not have disobeyed him in my unnerved state if I had wished to. I took his arm, and walked with him from the pier end, where we had been alone except for two or three sailors and a young Italian woman and her two children, through the large depot-building to the street.

There my companion signaled a cab, and when it came up assisted me to get into it. I was afraid he was going to get in after me, but he made no offer to do so. I thanked him for his kindness, and he bowed, looking at me in his intent way that yet was not rude or disrespectful.

"Good-bye," he said. "We shall meet again."

"We shall meet again." His words rang in my ear like an alarm note of evil to come. Why should he say we should meet again? He had not asked my address. He did not know who I was or where I lived. But I felt his words were prophetic. I had no wish to see him any more. He had excited in me the strangest feeling I ever had—a feeling of repulsion, and yet a sense of being controlled against my will, and of having my motives penetrated and understood.

But as the cab rattled over the stony pavement the motion seemed to shake my wandering senses together, and I forgot the strange man and his strange words, as the torrent of misery and dread rushed back upon me.

I crept up the long flights of stairs to my room, locked the door and threw myself on the lounge, burying my face in the pillow to try and shut out the picture that was presented so vividly to my mind. Gerald—my husband—going from me, standing in all his manly beauty on the deck of that fast-receding ship, with another woman by his side—a woman who clung to his arm and looked up adoringly into his face, as she had the right to do in the eyes of the world, for she was his acknowledged wife. He was with her now. Perhaps his arm was around her, her head against his shoulder as the vessel plowed its way across the Atlantic. He would be beside her for days and nights, for weeks and months. He would receive her love, her kisses. He would see her brighten in his presence, feel her arms cling to him—feel that he was so much to her. Oh, God! he might learn to love her. He might not be able to keep his promise to me.

She was not the breathing corpse she had appeared to me at first. I had persisted in keeping her before me as she looked when I fitted her dress—a creature of skin and bone, with sunken eyes and pallid lips—a bloodless creature, who seemed incapable of feeling or of exciting love.

She had seemed so then, and I had had no fear that Gerald could feel for her anything but pity and disgust. But now! Oh, surely there had come a change! The woman I had seen an hour ago—a slender shape, in a loose gray ulster, clinging to Gerald's arm—that woman was no breathing corpse. She was frail-looking—white as the foam of the sea that bore her on its bosom—but there was nothing to revolt—nothing to disgust in the flower-white face. It was not death-like; the warmth—if not the glow of life—of hope and love were there.

There was grace, too, in her slender figure as she leaned on Gerald's arm and smiled up at him like a happy child. He could not help feeling the adoring tenderness of her smile; he could not help being touched by it to compassion, at least—and, alas! pity is but a step to love in some natures.

Blind fool that I had been to say "This wan, frail woman can not love, nor can she awaken love!" Did I not know that love makes its own laws? It does not need that a woman shall be full of blood, and pink and plump, for her to feel the passion of love or to inspire it. Women of the frailest type—mere bundles of nerves with hardly enough flesh to incase them—have shown themselves capable of feeling the most passionate love and of inspiring it in men. Love is, indeed, a mystery and a wonder-worker. It may work a miracle in Elsie Vaughn as it did in Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It may draw her back from the gates of death.

"Oh! she will live—she will live, and I am ruined!" I cried, as I sprung from the lounge and walked the floor. "She will live!" I kept repeating, wringing my hands in agony of soul. "Gerald will care for her, traitor that he is—"

Reproach died on my lips. I could not blame Gerald for the ruin that threatened to overtake me. It was my work. It was I who had pulled down the lightnings upon my head. Gerald had been weak. He had let my stronger will overbear his scruples, his horror of the deed I had suggested, nay, urged upon him. It was I who had woven this web in which my own fate was tangled. I could blame no one. I had not even that poor comfort.

Yes, that wretched doctor; he was to blame. He had deceived Gerald. He had said that Elsie Vaughn could not live. Dr. McKenna, the physician who knew her best, who had accompanied her from Florida, had said she could not live three months. Could he have been so mistaken—a man of his skill and experience?

Oh, perhaps, after all, my fears are needless. Dr. McKenna should know best. This show of life and strength was a spasmodic outcome wrought by the galvanism of love and excitement. If I could only see Dr. McKenna, if I could hear from his lips his verdict in the case, that might satisfy me.

I would see him! I would go to his office to-morrow.

I would tell him I was Elsie's friend, and ask him to tell me if she would recover. This resolve quieted me. I lay down and slept after awhile—a disturbed, unrestful slumber.

## CHAPTER XI.

AT eight o'clock next morning I was dressed and out upon the street. But it took an hour to find Dr. McKenna's office. His address was not in any city or medical directory. Gerald had told me he lived in Beekman Place—that once aristocratic but now old-fashioned, out-of-theway part of New York. It was strange he should have gone there to live.

It was by merest accident I found the house. I had wandered about and made many inquiries, when I encountered an old black woman carrying a basketful of asparagus and white lettuce. I asked her the often-repeated question—"Can you tell me where Doctor McKenna lives?" and was gratified by her answer that she was his servant, and was on her way back to his house.

I followed her fat, waddling figure, and was soon seated in Dr. McKenna's office—a lofty-ceilinged room in one of those large old houses that are to be found in Beekman Place.

My black friend unlocked the office-door, saying, as she did it: "Master's out. He don't see nobody hardly. He ain't a-practicin' in New York yit, but he told me if you come, to let you in."

"Me? You are mistaken; he was not expecting a visit from me."

"He said a slim young woman with black eyes and curly hair, and that's like you. Anyways, now yer in, take a cheer and set down. Good sakes, Albert! what you doin' in here? I tho't you was down in your room fas' ersleep. How you come in here?"

She spoke to a young man who had parted the curtains of the bay-window and stepped out, rubbing his eyes as though just awake. He looked little mere than a boy. He had no sign of beard any more than of color on his dead-white skin. His hair, the color of honey, was cut in a short bang on his forehead like a school-girl's, and clustered behind in half curls. His eyebrows were black and slender like a black cord, and delicately arched over his large blue eyes, that looked almost black, so large were the pupils. They had the look of a child, and there was a childishness in his voice as he said:

"I must have come in here in the night—walked in my sleep again. I don't know what makes me walk in my sleep so. I do it every time old Mack operates on me," he added, querulously, still rubbing his eyes.

"Don't you talk that onrespectful way about Doctor McKenna. You're 'clare er doin' it before his face; and here's a young lady come to see him, too. You're so near-sighted you ain't seen her."

She pointed to me, and the young man made a hurried but graceful bow.

"You come out now and git your breakfast, Albert, and leave the lady alone," said the black woman, speaking with authority.

He had been about to leave the room, but when she spoke he stopped, looked at her with a flash of the eye, and said, sullenly:

"I'll go out when I please."

"Doctor McKenna ain't a-goin' to like it if you stay here talkin'; you know he ain't."

"I don't care," Albert said, seating himself. "I am not his nigger—not yet. The lady will like to have me stay and talk to her, I know."

He looked at me and smiled, showing his small, white teeth. I wondered at him. He had a man's tall stature, but he talked like a child and was talked to as one by the old black woman. There must be something wrong; he must be of feeble mind, I thought. I wondered still more when the woman had gone out and left us alone. Albert looked at me with the frank stare of a child.

"You are pretty," he said. "How old are you? Twenty your next birthday? Why, that's my age. I wonder if we were born under the same star. I am born to great luck. I found it out myself. I am to be rich and to marry a beautiful woman."

"Clearly he is weak-minded," I thought; but the next moment he was talking knowingly on all the topics of the day, delivering his opinions upon political and social questions.

He had strong opinions on some subjects. He was in favor of socialism and communism. He sympathized with the Russian nihilists. He gave ingenious reasons for his sympathy. He knew of every anarchist in America, it seemed. He talked about dynamite, and Greek fire, and the rights of the people with wonderful eloquence and rapidity, coming close to me, and finally throwing himself on a low, broad ottoman at my feet.

I found he was not only familiar with all newspaper topics, but that he knew a good deal about history, ancient history particularly. He touched upon it in his rambling way, and spoke of Nero and other tyrants.

"Do you know," he said, leaning to me in a confidential way, "there are some men nowadays worse tyrants than Nero? They tyrannize over the mind, the very soul. Nero only played the despot over the body. Let me tell you," he went on, leaning still nearer to me, "McKenna's a tyrant, a born tyrant. He'll make a slave of your soul if you don't mind. You'll want to run away from him and you can't. Look out for him in time. A word to the wise. You understand."

"I didn't understand at all. The house seemed full of mysteries. I was told that I was expected by Dr. McKenna, who had never heard of me, and now I was warned against him by one of his household.

"I don't know Doctor McKenna at all," I said. "Is

he a relative of yours?"

He held up his slender, blue-veined wrist.

"If there was a drop of his blood in these veins of mine I'd cut them open and let it out!" he said, passionately, his eyes emitting their strange flash.

Then he hung his head.

"But I am his slave," he said. "I wear his chain. I'll break it some day."

He sat for some time in silence, looking down, then he raised his head. The flash had died out of his face. His eyes looked listless, his cheek ashen white.

"These are all fancies of mine," he said. "Doctor McKenna is a good man. He's kind to me. He's my guardian. He takes care of my money and keeps people from cheating me. He took me away from some sort of school where they ill-treated me. He's going to get a fortune for me some day, and I will give half of it to him. Somebody else has got it now, but it ought to be mine by rights. Yes, Doctor McKenna is very good to me. He is doctoring me with the magnetic treatment. He says it keeps me alive. I'm not strong, you know. I've never been able to study much, but I have read books, oh, lots of old books out in Texas, where I lived. I know Shakespeare and Milton and Shelley. I'll show you what I like best in Shelley."

He went to some shelves of books in a corner of the room and took down a volume of Shakespeare and read aloud some passages in "Timon of Athens." He did not read them well. He was near-sighted, and he ran his words together, failing to give them their full force.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed, flinging down the book, "that sounds tame when I read. I wish I could hear you read. Your voice is sweet—like my mother's. She's the only

woman I ever heard read. Won't you read something—a few verses?"

"Yes," I said. I had just taken up a volume of Mrs. Browning's poems. On the fly-leaf was written "From Elsie." So it was a gift to Dr. McKenna from Elsie Vaughn. The book opened of itself at the sonnets, so called, "From the Portuguese," which all the world knows were not from the Portuguese, but from Elizabeth Barrett's own passionate heart, showing the growth of her love for the poet Browning. I turned to the one she had read to Gerald the morning after their marriage—yesterday morning. Was it only yesterday? It seemed a month of days. I had lived years of suffering since that marriage.

"I will read you this sonnet," I said, prompted by the self-cruelty that makes us press upon a hurting sore or an exposed and aching nerve. I knew every line of the poem would hurt me, yet I read it, and never, I think, was its feeling-fraught lines voiced with such passionate pathos.

The boy Albert was entranced. After I had finished he stood gazing at me like one spell-bound. At last he cried:

"Oh, read on! Your voice is like beautiful music. I could listen to it forever. Would you sing for me? Come to the piano; I can play a little but I can't sing. If you would sing, and look at me when you sing, I would think I was in heaven. Come, sing for me."

He seized my hand in his abrupt, child-like way. His face was animated again, his eyes flashing wildly bright. As he repeated "Come," we heard a step outside, the rattle of a latch-key in the hall door. He dropped my hands instantly. The light passed out of his face; a look of dread, almost of terror, darkened over it.

He bent his head quickly to my ear.

"It's Nero! He's coming!" he whispered. "Don't let him put his chain upon you."

He darted through the door, and left me bewildered.

I picked up the volume that had dropped from my

hand, and was replacing it on the shelf, when I heard a soft step enter the room.

Before I could turn—a voice like no other I ever heard—a voice sweet, sibilant, said:

"Good-morning! You came earlier than I expected." The book dropped to the floor in the start of surprise I gave.

I turned, and was face to face with the man who had supported me when I fainted on the pier.

"I told you we should meet again," he said, his cool, sea-green eyes looking me through and through. "I expected you to-day, but not so soon."

"You expected me to-day! Why?" I gasped, a species of terror taking possession of me. Albert's warning was still in my ears.

"Because I willed you to come. Everything comes to us if we can only will it to come strongly enough. But sit down. You are trembling. Sit down and rest before you tell me why you came to see me."

I felt as though he already knew why I had come, and all about me. I sat down in the chair he placed for me, and he came and stood near me.

"Are you quite recovered?" he asked, putting his fingers upon my wrist. It was only a light professional touch, but it made me shiver.

"Your pulse is still a little irregular. It beats fitfully," he said. "Your nerves are out of tune. You did not sleep well last night."

I expected he would tell me why I did not sleep. His eyes had surely probed to the bottom of my soul; but I made an effort to control my face and voice, and answered, as quietly as I could:

"No, I did not sleep well. I would be glad to have you give me a prescription for insomnia and nervousness. I have heard you highly spoken of by "—I determined to

carry out my purpose, and I looked him boldly in the face
—"by my friend, Miss Elsie Vaughn, now Mrs. Oldridge."

- "Ah, Elsie Vaughn is your friend! I have doubtless heard her speak of you."
- "Perhaps so. Like herself, I am from the South. My name is Monteagle."
  - " Miss Monteagle?"
- "Miss Monteagle. I went yesterday to see Mrs. Old-ridge off on the steamer. It was most sad to me—her going away—though it is on a wedding-journey. I am afraid I shall not see her again."

He made no response, though my words were spoken interrogatively. I went on. I was determined now to carry out the purpose of my visit in spite of these subtle, searching eyes.

- "She is very feeble. I suppose, Doctor McKenna, it is a mere chance that she may live to come home?"
- "There is no knowing," he said, after a pause. "Nothing is more uncertain than life."
- "There is no knowing with certainty, perhaps; but science, the science you profess, is able to predict almost with surety. I want to ask you, as Elsie's friend, for your frank opinion of her case. You are her physician."

His face darkened. He made a quick, dissenting gesture and seemed about to say something impulsively, but he checked himself."

- "I was her physician in Florida," he said.
- "And you studied her case fully. You have estimated her chances for life—what are they? Your answer shall be regarded as sacredly confidential."

He looked at me keenly.

- "You are her friend, you say?"
- "Yes, as I told you, we are both southerners. I know her antecedents—her family history. I take great interest in her fate."

"Naturally," he said, still looking at me in such a way that it required all my self-control to face him.

He dropped his eyes to the watch-charm he was twisting in his fingers—a curious onyx dragon's head with emerald eyes. When he lifted them to mine again they had a queer glitter down in their yellow-green depths.

"What if I told you Elsie Vaughn would die within a

very few months?" he said.

I dropped my lids to hide the flash of joy that came into my eyes.

"That is a very sad verdict for a friend of Elsie's to

hear," I faltered.

"Very sad, indeed—for a *friend* to hear, as you say," he answered; and raising my eyes, startled at the stress he laid on the word friend, I caught the shadow of a satirical smile playing about his mouth.

"Fortunately," he went on, slowly, "it is not true.

Mrs. Oldridge will not die within a few months—unless

something unforeseen occurs to hasten her demise."

"That is a relief"—I fear my tone belied my words—
"she will last longer, then? How long do you think?"

"What if I should tell you that she bids fair to live a full life-time—to recover—and be as well as any woman?"

The sudden revulsion of feeling threw me off my guard.

"Then you will contradict your own words—your own professional opinion. You gave it that she could not recover," I cried, excitedly, "and that she was in the last

stages of consumption."

"I did not," he said. "That was the verdict of the distinguished specialist—so styled"—with a scornful bitterness—"who was called in to see the case when Mrs. Oldridge took it into her head that my treatment was injuring her niece. He pronounced Miss Vaughn's malady to be consumption—though she was not told so. I had diagnosed the disease differently."

"What was your diagnosis?"

"Malarial poison—of long standing—affecting the blood, the liver, and, by sympathy, the lungs."

"And it will not prove fatal?"

"Once I thought it might; but now"—with his intent eyes transfixing mine—"now I am able to say to you that Elsie Vaughn will, in all probability, get well and sound; perhaps come back from her wedding-trip rosy, plump, and—beautiful."

Significant, malicious enjoyment gleamed in his eyes. I was too stunned to care for its significance. For a second the room swam around me. I felt as though I should drop from the chair, and threw out my hand instinctively to clutch a support. It was caught in the cold, clammy fingers of the strange man who had risen and was bending over me.

"You are feeling faint again," he said, his voice sounding far off. "Smell this ammonia."

I felt him put the vial to my nostrils; I pushed his hand violently away. Despair and angry bitterness swelled up in my heart and drowned all caution.

"You have lied!" I cried, passionately. "You have willfully deceived in this matter! You told—one—that Elsie Vaughn would not recover—that she would die in three months!"

He folded his arms and stood looking down at me. He was not the least angered by my passionate words. His swarthy face was as impassive as ever; only the strange eyes emitted a flash of satisfaction. I felt that my secret was out—at least that he knew it was not for love of Elsie that I had come to him to ask concerning her fate.

"I did tell one person only what you have said," he answered. "That person was the man who married Elsie Vaughn. He gave his word of honor to me that he would never mention it, and he has told you. That is strange."

"Not so strange as that you should have deceived him—willfully, deliberately," I said.

- "I did deceive him, I admit it. It was done deliberately and for a purpose. We are told in the so-called inspired Book to do evil that good may come of it. This was what I did."
  - "What good did you expect would come of it?"
- "The breaking off of a marriage that I believed would not benefit Elsie Vaughn. I knew of the boy and girl engagement between her and young Oldridge. I saw him and studied him. He is not hard to read; but I have been deceived for the first time in my life in my estimate of a man. I would have sworn that this one was governed by the laws of what is called conscience—that he was hightoned—as it is styled. When he came to me, I believed from his tone and what I knew of his strait-laced ideas of right, that if I told him Elsie Vaughn was a dying girl he would not marry her. He felt himself in a manner bound to carry out his promise to her; but if she were hopelessly diseased, such a promise could not bind him. It would be too horrible and revolting a thing to wed a breathing corpse. 'The man may want this girl's fortune,' I said to myself, 'but he has not the nerve—the moral hardihood to marry a dying woman for her money. The sequel showed I was wrong. He did have the nerve, or, if he did not have it himself, some one else supplied it. Some outside stronger will influenced him to act contrary to his code of right." His look said plainly, "That outside influence was yours."

I had ceased to care what he thought. I was half mad with anguish and with fierce resentment toward this man who had deceived Gerald.

- "And your motive for this misrepresentation?" I cried.
- "I have told you what it was—regard for Miss Vaughn's, my patient's, welfare. I believed that marriage with this young man would not agree with her. She is intensely devoted in her nature. Strong emotions would

exhaust her nervous system. That was my reason in part. There was another consideration."

- "Which was, no doubt, that marriage with you would have been less injurious."
- "It would have been—yes; there would have been less danger of exhausting emotions. It might have been even beneficial."
  - "Beneficial to you," I sneered.

He bowed. He was not the least angered. His face looked the same—a mask of yellow marble—only his eye was alive, scintillant.

- "And so your ruse failed of its purpose," I went on, carried along by the impulse of bitter feeling. "Your falsehood failed of its effect—you lost the heiress and made a marriage that—"
- "That may turn out happily, though it was made for money. It seems to have had a happy effect so far on the lady. She looked really bright yesterday, did she not? You must be very much gratified to have seen her look so well; and what I have told you this afternoon about her chances for recovery must give you great pleasure, since you are such a good friend of the lady—and of her husband, perhaps. Is it so? You know him, you say?"

"I know him."

"You know him, of course. A nice young man. If he married for money, he had a right to. Every human being has a right to better his condition by all safe means."

He did not say honorable means. He had seated himself by me. His face was close to me. His eyes seemed like two malicious, mocking, live things—impish souls—watching me from that impassive, swarthy face.

I felt I should do or say some desperate thing if I remained a moment longer. The wild idea crossed my mind that I would tell him my secret and ask him to help me. It was only momentary, born of the subtle power of his look. I rose abruptly.

"I have taken up too much of your valuable time," I said. "I will go at once. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing—not even an apology for telling me that I lied. I forgive you. Some day you may owe me something. A big debt, perhaps. We shall meet again."

"Never!" I cried, and involuntarily I shuddered.

He smiled with his eyes, and stroked his long black beard that shone with a curious metallic luster. Possibly it was dyed.

"We shall meet again—and often," he repeated. "It is fate. You do not like me. That does not matter. I do not care to have people like me. It is better to influence them against their will. There is a piquancy in that. And you are not a common sort of girl. There are great possibilities in you. Don't fling them away for the sake of an emotion. No man living is worth such a sacrifice. Do the best you can with yourself. Make the most of your life and your gifts. If your heart comes in the way, trample it down, silence it, kill it—as I did mine."

He had caught my wrists in a tight grip, and leaning close to me looked at me. His looked dazed me. I stood motionless while he talked.

"You and I will be friends—must be friends," he went on. "We may help each other some day. So don't burn your life out with emotion. Take care of yourself. Go now and eat a good breakfast. I can see by your looks you have had nothing. Then go home and go to bed. Take a spoonful of the contents of this vial—it is only bromo-caffeine—and sleep; shut your eyes, and banish anxious thoughts, and sleep. That is my earnest advice. You won't take it? You will give way to that wretched heart, that plays the mischief with women, until you are stretched on a bed of fever. Then you will send for me."

"Never!" I tried to say, but my lips barely moved. No sound escaped them.

"Or I will come without being sent for. Don't fear, I

shall do you no harm. Your welfare is my interest. Good-bye—until we meet."

He dropped my hand. I crept out of the office like a stricken, bewildered thing. What manner of man was this?

The appeal of that strange boy, Albert, rang in my ears: "Don't let him put his chain on you!"

What was Dr. McKenna? What gave him such powers of discernment and intuition? Was he a malignant being? Why had Elsie's aunt refused to let him treat her longer? Was this cessation of his treatment the cause of her improvement in health? Who was Albert? Was he a genius or an idiot? What was Dr. McKenna doing with him? What was the power he seemed to have over the boy, who disliked yet feared and obeyed him?

How wildly thoughts and queries and conjectures galloped through my brain. Yes, Dr. McKenna was right: I had fever. My head was in a whirl, my cheeks were burning. I almost tottered as I walked, and I dropped at last upon a seat under the trees of a square and sat there, soon forgetting to worry about the mystery of the house in Beekman Place in the absorbing torture of one thought. I had married my husband to a living woman, not a dying one. She would live, and he would learn to care for her and to forget me. No, no, that would never be. I was his own true wife, his only love. He had sworn it. I filled all his heart. There was room for no other.

But how could he be my own again? How, without ruin, disgrace, a trial and a prison? He would never desert me, but how could he be all my own again?

## CHAPTER XII.

I sat there in the square, how long I can not tell. A strange languor overcame me. My head throbbed with a dull, aching sensation. The roar in the hot streets outside

the little space of shade and coolness made by the trees of the square, sounded in my ears like the sea—the sea that was bearing my husband and his bride on its bosom.

At last I was roused by an uneasy sensation—the feeling one has when one is being stealthily watched by a pair of human eyes. I raised my head and looked around. There were only a few persons beside myself sitting on the benches under the trees. These were mostly nurse-maids with children under their charge or a baby in its pretty carriage, drawn up in the lengthening shadows of the trees. There were a few tired-looking men and some pale invalids, breathing in the fresh air after the long, hot day. But who was it that had been gazing at me with such intentness as to rouse me from an abstraction that was almost stupor? Could it be that man with his head bent down over a book and his hat drawn over his eyes?

He sat at some little distance from me. I could not see his face, but the lines of his figure, the look of his neck and head made me think of Dr. McKenna. Could it be that this man had followed me? He had said I was going to be ill, and certainly some abnormal physical condition was creeping over me. What was I to him that he should take an interest in me? How could I be of use to him or he to me, as he had said? He had helped to ruin my life. But for his falsehood, deliberately told, I might not have hugged the fatal delusion to my heart that Elsie would not recover. He had done this, as I believed, to break off her old engagement in the hope that he could succeed in getting her and her money for himself. He had done me this injury, and he had found out a part, at least, of my secret. He knew that I loved Gerald. Partly my swoon had betrayed this to him, and partly he had drawn it out by his cunning questions and the subtle penetration of his eyes.

"He shall find out nothing more," I said to myself.
"He nor any mortal living shall make me betray my secret—the secret that would consign Gerald to a prison—for

my sin. I will never see this man again. I will never subject myself to the power of his glance—a supernatural, a baleful power—as I surely believe."

And fearing that it might be he who sat across from me with his head bent and his wide crush-hat drawn over his face, I rose quickly and slipped away.

How fearfully my head went round! When I reached my lodging-house the stairs seemed interminable. I clung to the railing, and when my room was gained I tottered past my mother, hearing her exclaim:

"Hilda, Hilda! what is the matter? Are you ill?" and

fell upon my bed.

I knew nothing more for days—nothing, I mean, of what passed around me. My soul wandered—its way lost—in some weird, horrible region of shadows and semi-darkness. I was fighting with phantoms, and then again with hideous shapes, whose long, hairy arms and clawed hands reached and clutched me as I struggled desperately on. Mocking voices and jeering laughter rang in my ears, snake-like eyes gleamed before and around me.

Sometimes, as through a whirling mist, I caught a glimpse of the faces around me—my mother's, my little sister's, the ruddy, kindly face of our family doctor—now white and grave—but the glimpse was momentary and brought no sense of why those familiar faces hovered around me and why they looked so pale, so anxious and frightened.

Once I heard a voice say, "If she could only sleep! All depends upon that." And then a wailing prayer from my mother's lips arrested my wandering sense for an instant.

"God give her sleep. He who giveth sleep to His beloved, send this blessed boon to my child."

"Why not pray for the deeper rest of death?" was my fleeting thought, and then the darkness and the phantoms

gathered around me again, and I struggled with the fiends of the world of Delirium—the border-land of madness.

Suddenly there came a sense of relief. The fiends ceased their torture, the dark shapes disappeared, the whirling clouds, the din—and the terror. It seemed as though a voice low, sweet, but full of mastery, had spoken, and all the dark influences that warred with my being heard it and slunk away.

Then a great calm fell upon me. They who watched me told me afterward that my wild, tossing movements ceased, my eyes lost their strained, dilated look, the lids fell, and I slept—the strange, magnetic slumber.

The cause of the change was the power of one soul over another. While Dr. Martin and my mother and little Nell stood about my bed watching, in speechless anxiety, the progress of the fever—seeing it burn in my scorched cheeks and lips, and in my wide, dilated eyes—and praying vainly that the all-saving sleep might descend upon me—while thus they watched and prayed and despaired, a man entered the room. They had heard no knock—no step—so softly did he enter the hushed room, where only my labored breathing and occasional incoherent utterance were heard.

The first they knew of his entrance was his appearance among them around the bed—a man with sallow, yellow skin, hair in straggling locks above his oily forehead, a long beard that nearly concealed his mouth, and greenish glasses that half hid his eyes.

He bowed when he saw them looking at him, and said:

"This young woman came to see me the day she was taken ill. I knew she was going to have this fever. Brain and nerves are congested. She will die if she does not sleep."

"Of course—we know that," Dr. Martin said, gruffly. "But in her case opiates have failed. I can do no more."

"Then I will try," said the man, and he pushed up the green glasses and looked at Doctor Martin for the first time.

"Who are you?" the physician asked, abruptly, struck

by the strange look of the man's eyes.

"I am called McKenna—Doctor Erastus McKenna," answered the new-comer, as he seated himself by the bed and deliberately took off his glasses.

Dr. Martin drew my wondering mother to the window and said to her:

"He is a charlatan—a quack—regarded so by the profession. He came here in charge of a wealthy young female patient, and he was dismissed by her relations because regular physicians pronounced his practice mere quackery. He believes in laying on of hands, in magnetism, and I don't know what other isms."

"But if he can do Hilda any good—" said my poor mother as my broken moans reached her from the bed.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"If," he said, significantly. "But we will let him try," he added. "I am willing to try anything for her sake."

The man seated beside the bed was waiting for no permission to try. He had bent over me and laid his fingers gently upon my forehead, stroking my brow, my head with long, light fingers soft as the silken touch of the bat's wing to the sleeper it would soothe.

I resisted his soothing spell. I threw off his hands in my delirium, exclaiming that a snake was crawling over me. He persisted, using both hands now as he bent over me, his face intent, its muscles rigid, his eyes fixed upon me, drops of moisture standing on his knitted, concentrated brow.

At last he triumphed. My restless movements ceased gradually, my lids crept slowly together, and I slept. He breathed a low sigh of exhaustion and raised his head. He was pale to ghastliness.

"I will let her sleep twelve hours," he said. "Tomorrow, at noon, I will come and waken her. Have some light nourishment ready for her to take."

He bent his head slightly to my mother and the amazed doctor and left the room.

It happened as he said. The next day at noon he came and found me still lying, like a breathing statue, in that deep, saving slumber.

He leaned over me. A motion of his hand, and my eyes opened, no longer dilated and wild in their gaze; the light of intelligent consciousness shone in them. But a thrill of dismay shot through me as I saw the face of Dr. McKenna—that face, like a swarthy mask with its small deep-set eyes, twin living intelligences looking out through narrow windows.

"Why have you come here, unasked and unwanted?" I exclaimed, with the first impulse of fear and repulsion.

He smiled, apparently not ill-pleased. My dear mother's sense of gratitude was shocked by my exclamation.

"Darling," she said, bending over me, the tears streaming down her cheeks, "this is the good doctor who gave you that sweet sleep. He has saved your life."

"Saved my life? But what a price I must pay for it!" I cried.

My mother thought my words referred to the medical fee, but Dr. McKenna knew better. I saw it in his face. He understood what passed through me the instant I opened my eyes and saw his face.

I felt that somehow he had made my spirit obey him, and that, having made it serve him once, it would be easy to master it hereafter.

He would use the power he had gained. He would use it to wrest my secret from me. I felt this instinctively.

Why he wanted to know that secret I could not clearly understand, but it was for evil—this I felt. It was for evil to Gerald; and the strength of my love overpowered my

weakness of mind and body even in that moment of enfeebled powers and concentrated on the instant into the resolve:

"He shall not know!"

I said this in the silent depths of my heart, and, as I said it, met his look.

A flash of comprehension darted from beneath his lids. He guessed my thought, and his look and slight, slow, derisive smile was like a challenge flung down to me.

I took the nourishment that he had ordered, and felt wonderfully better. When he had gone, saying he would come next day, I eagerly questioned my mother:

- "Have you given that man the slightest hint that I was married?" I asked.
- "No, no, dear Hilda. Don't be anxious on that score," she said. "I have given you my solemn promise never to allude to your marriage. I think sometimes I was wrong to do this; but I will keep my promise, though it has cost me pangs of conscience more than once. I was obliged to tell this man a falsehood."
  - "He asked you, then, if I was married?"
  - "Yes."
  - "And he asked if you knew Gerald?"
- "No: he has had no time to ask me questions. He has only been here twice. I sat here, and he talked to me not two minutes. It was all about you. He only said, 'Your daughter has a fine constitution—that is in her favor. She is quite young, too. Did I not understand her to say she was or she had been married?' Then he looked at me with his strange eyes, and I felt as though he were wrenching the truth from my heart. I had to call up all my nerve to look back at him calmly and tell what was not the truth. Oh, Hilda, I wish the necessity for this concealment were at an end!"
  - "It will be, dear-it will be-after awhile," I answered.

"But we must be careful of this man. Was Nell in the room?"

"No; Doctor Martin forbade her coming in while you were so sick. She could not help being frightened and

crying."

"Bring her to me presently. I feel better. It is the heat that made me sick. We must leave the city soon. We will go as soon as I am able to some quiet place in the country."

"Yes; Doctor McKenna said you must go. He told

me he knew of a place—"

- "I will go to no place he suggests. He must not know when we are going, or where we go. Do you hear, mother?" I cried, vehemently. "I do not want to see him again. I will not see him alone, nor must you speak to him alone!"
  - "Hilda!" She looked at me in surprise.
- "I will tell you my reasons—some time. I am too weak now. I must rest, that I may get well soon and go away. Mother, tell me how long I have been ill."

"Five days."

"It is six days since Gerald went away—too soon yet to hear from him. In two days more— Oh! I wish the two days were only a few minutes long!"

I fell back on my pillow exhausted, and soon slept again.

Two days later I was sitting propped up in bed. My strength was rapidly returning. I had a constitution that shook off disease as the priests of Buddha are said to shake off a serpent and the poison of its fangs. I had not seen Dr. McKenna since the turn in my malady. I was looking every moment for a dispatch from Gerald—listening for the step of the messenger.

I light knock fell upon the door. "Come in," I cried out, my heart giving a throb of expectation.

The door opened. No boy in the blue uniform and cap of the telegraph messenger. The person who entered with

that light, panther tread, was Dr. McKenna. He came up to the bed and laid his fingers on my wrist. He looked into my face—and I nerved myself to give back his look firmly and defiantly. He should feel that he was not my master.

I saw a shade of disappointment come into his face. He had not thought to feel my will resist his so strongly. He looked at me with a puzzled, clouded expression in his eyes. Perhaps he was doubting whether he had not drawn wrong conclusions after all. He pulled the greenish glasses over his eyes, and sat down and began to talk to my mother. Whenever he talked I forgot his eyes and my dread of them. His voice was music itself—sweet, with a melancholy, flute-like sweetness, full of subtle inflections and cadences.

I lay and drank in the melody of his voice. A knock on the door aroused me. This time it was the blue-capped messenger with my looked-for cablegram. I forgot all discretion, and seized and tore open the envelope with tremblingly eager fingers. The message was brief:

"Arrived safely. Have written. Be good to yourself. Yours only."

No name, but none was needed.

"Yours only." The two words were as cool water to one fainting with thirst. He had crossed the Atlantic with that other woman, whom the world believed to be his wife, and still he was mine only.

I had forgotten the presence of Dr. McKenna. As I looked up, I met his eye fixed upon me. I was deeply annoyed at the way I had betrayed excitement and eagerness. He knew it was a cablegram I had received. The messenger had said it was, and he could see the envelope. He had doubtless guessed who it was from, and he had seen the joy that sparkled in my face.

"Let me suggest that you lie down now and be quiet,"

he said, presently. "Good news is exciting as well as bad news. Am I right in fancying that your cable message is from your dear friend, Mrs. Oldridge?"

I felt the blood ebb from my heart. I glanced at my

mother, and met her wondering look.

"Mrs. Oldridge!" was the utterance I saw trembling on her lips. I checked it by suddenly crying out, as though a violent pain had seized me, and putting my hand to my head. In an instant my mother was on her feet and bending over me, appealing anxiously to Dr. McKenna. He helped me to remove the propping pillows, and laid me down gently, answering my mother with suave solicitude, though I saw and comprehended the shadow of a derisive smile that hovered about his bearded mouth.

"I will get away from him. I must get away somewhere out of his reach," was my resolve.

#### CHAPTER XIII.

I convalesced rapidly. In a few days I was able to be up. I consulted the newspapers and found among the advertisements one of a place I thought would just suit us. It was in Orange County, a short run out of the city, a mile from the railroad station. I took the train and ran out to look at it, taking Nell with me.

How delighted she was to get out into the green, beautiful country. She kept her little curly head out of the window all the time, going into ecstasies over the daisies, the cows, standing knee-deep in lush grass, and the farmhouses with outlying fields and orchards, and hens with broods of little chickens scratching away in the barn-yard.

I had said to myself I was sure to be disappointed about the place I had come to see. Everybody was disappointed who put faith in an advertisement. But for once there was no disappointment, only a happy surprise, for the farm building was an old revolutionary house, picturesque and time-stained, with peaked gables literally mantled in Virginia creeper. It had a large yard full of old trees, a view of mountain-tops lofty enough to catch the gleam of breaking day while yet the lower lands were in the shadow of night.

There were woods near at hand—cool, deep woods, with a stream running through them between banks of gray rocks seamed with green moss. Further on was an old mill, the long motionless wheel broken and mossy.

I never saw a creature so charmed as was Nell. The old farmer showed her a pony, a venerable, sedate-looking creature, which he said she could ride, and a hen and chickens that she could have if she would feed them, and a little garden corner which she might claim as hers, with all the pinks and marigolds and the sweet-smelling thyme that bordered it.

We made arrangements with the farmer for coming out immediately and taking possession of his two best rooms. He drove us to the station in his market-wagon, through the cool of the summer afternoon, and bade us a hearty good-bye, promising to be at the station to meet us the next day but one.

The appointed time found us at the old Mill House, with such of our household goods as I had not stored for the summer, and with Nell happy and mamma bewildered at the celerity of my movements. My dear, good mother; she did not dream that I was running away from the city to escape the keen eye and abnormal insight of one who was hounding my closely hidden secret.

It was one of the sad circumstances of my fate that I could not ask sympathy of any one—even of my mother—no one but Gerald; and he—was the time coming when he might feel for me, but no longer with me? Sometimes the fear came to me like a prophecy.

My mother thought I had almost every reason to be happy. I was no longer worried about money. I had no

longer to cut and stitch in Miss Nipper's work-room. It is true Gerald was away; but he would soon return, and then—as I had told her—our marriage would be declared. Of the gulf of sin and dread into which we two had plunged—through my ambition—my mother had no dream. Her mind had been greatly weakened by her past troubles and sickness. She was like a sweet-tempered child—easily made happy—with no anxiety for to-morrow; satisfied if she had her simple meals, her little walk with Nell, and her chair brought out on the shady piazza where she could sew, or read the novels she delighted in.

I thank God she never knew the burden I was bearing—the tumult that went on in my breast.

I was feverishly eager to hear from Gerald. His letter came promptly by the next steamer—two weeks after he had sailed. It was as full of love and tender thoughtfulness as the most ardent heart could desire. He said little about his voyage except that they had had smooth sailing and pleasant weather.

He made plans for me; urged me to make myself comfortable in every way, to spend without stint the money he had put in bank for my use, to cultivate my voice, if I could find a good teacher in the city or at some of the near summer resorts, to have nice dresses made, take my mother and Nell to the country or by the sea-shore, "where you can have fresh air and nice bathing. Take a sweet rest there, dear Hilda. Read, sketch, and write some more lovely little poems like the last you sent me. I want you to keep up your spirits. I can't bear to think that you are staying at home drooping, while I am seeing all these fine sights in the old world you longed to see. If I could have you at my side, what a pair of jolly comrades we would be!"

There was more in the same strain. My own dear boy, how tenderly he wrote to his little wife! I kissed the letter, and my tears threatened to blot its pages.

"If I could have you at my side!" Ah, how blessed if it could be so, I thought, and then suddenly it occurred to me that Gerald had not said one word in his letter about the woman who had in truth been at his side. Elsie's name had not fallen from his pen. He wrote:

"We had a pleasant voyage, the sea smooth as glass, except during two days. No event broke the monotony except the usual seasickness."

Not a word of her—his bride of a week—she whose love for him was so strong that it had called her back from the grave. He had had her at his side all the time, her hand had rested on his arm, her head against his shoulder. How had he felt toward her? How had she borne the trip? Was it possible she had felt only the "usual seasickness?" I know the source of the disappointment that came over me as I again read the letter in which there was no reference to Elsie. It made me shudder at myself. I realized that I had cherished the hope this letter would speak of Elsie's illness, would say that she had not been able to stand the voyage, that she was worse. But there was no word with special reference to Elsie.

"Our party was only seasick for the first three days, after that we were on deck all the time," Gerald had written.

In his after letters the same reticence was apparent. He wrote often. He wrote amusingly, interestingly—always with affection and tenderness, but he made no allusion to the future as connected with Elsie. He avoided mentioning her name.

At length I could stand it no longer. I upbraided him with his want of frankness.

"Tell me all," I wrote. "I know you feel how miserably anxious I am. How is Elsie? What is the state of her health? Tell me truly."

He answered my question in his next letter, but there

was constraint and reluctance apparent in his reply—at least I thought so.

"Elsie's health is very uncertain. She seems much brighter and stronger upon some days than she does on others. There is no saying with any positiveness whether she is improving or not.

"You understand, I know, my dear Hilda, why I do not like to write of her. I do not like to think of the wrong I have done her. It makes me miserably remorseful. I would to God I had never crossed her path. But I will not write in this way. It only makes you unhappy, and it does no good now to regret what has been done. All we can do is to wait, and to try to avoid as much as possible the consequences of our deed. To this end, remember, we agreed to destroy each other's letters—to burn each one when it had been read. Do not forget this precaution, dear Hilda. Destroy my letters—every one—as I destroy yours. I find it hard to burn these dear little messages that seem all alive with you, but I compel myself to watch them burned to ashes or I tear them in fine bits."

I destroyed his letters in the same way. Of course there was too much risk in keeping one of them. I had a constant dread that McKenna might find me—might come and establish himself here in this peaceful spot, where I was trying to calm myself and cool the hot pulses of my passionate being.

The long summer days went by. I passed them in reading, in studying French and in writing to Gerald. I tried to carry out his wish about cultivating my voice. I advertised for a teacher and got several replies. I called at the address of the one whose reply had pleased me best. She was a broken-down singer, whose voice had once led the choir in a fashionable church, and had been applauded in concert halls. She strained the fine organ and ruined

it. She lived now in obscurity—a pale, saddened but most interesting woman—and supported herself by giving lessons in music and singing.

She told me I had an excellent voice.

"Ah, how strong and rich it is!" she cried, clasping her delicate hands. "It is a mezzo soprano. I will take delight in training it."

It was arranged that I should come into the city twice a week to take lessons of her. She lived far up-town in one of the large apartment houses in Harlem. So I had no fear of meeting Dr. McKenna.

In New York you rarely meet any one you know unless you walk often upon Broadway. But I did not take in account the many currents and under-currents that draw human beings together.

One day, on entering Mrs. Wade's little parlor, I found, seated at the piano, Albert, the handsome strange young man I had seen in Dr. McKenna's office. When he saw me his countenance beamed with delight. He jumped up from his seat at the piano and ran to me.

"Oh! lady with the sweet voice!" he cried: "I am so happy to see you. I was afraid I should never see you any more—though Mephistopheles said I would. Old Mack is Mephistopheles, you know. That straight lock of hair that stands up on the top of his head is his cock's feather -Mephistopheles's feather. Am I his Faust, do you think? May be so, for I can't get free from him. No I can't," shaking his head. "Be my Marguerite, and beg me to shun that wicked man, as Marguerite did, and I'll mind you. I won't be a fool, like Faust. Here I am chattering, and you standing up. Sit down, Marguerite, and read another little poem for me. Here is one I have written—to you. Don't you see, 'To the Sweetest Eyes.' Ah! don't read it yet. Let me play this waltz for you. The music came to me in a dream. I saw a moonlit sea, with white waves rolling, and spirits dancing on the

tops of the waves, and singing, with hands intwined. I got up in the night and played the dance-song I had heard in my dream. Come, I will play it for you. How happy I am to see you again!"

He talked so rapidly, holding my hands and swinging them as he talked, smiling into my face with his beautiful soft eyes and his child-like mouth, that I was bewildered. At last I half gasped:

"Where is Doctor McKenna?"

"He has gone into the next room to cure Mrs. Wade. She has a terrible pain in her head. He will charm it away—Mephistopheles can charm away pain—but he leaves something in its place—something, I don't know what "—he put his hand up to his head in a bewildered way. "He left something here with me. I am not as I was. It isn't the same me. It's his chain—I call it that. It draws you back to him. I have tried to go away and be somebody. It's in me to hew myself a path in the world, but—I come back to him—and then I lose all ambition; I'm satisfied to be his poodle-dog"—he ended his speech with a half sob, shaking his head and setting his teeth together.

Then he became quiet and sat motionless on the pianostool, his face downcast and dejected. A noise behind me made me turn around. There stood Dr. McKenna. He evinced no surprise at seeing me. He bowed with a fine, stately grace, and did not even extend his hand to me. He said:

"Our friend, Mrs. Wade, is not well, I am sorry to say. The pain in her head has been relieved and she is asleep."

"Then you know Mrs. Wade?" I managed to say.

"Mrs. Wade is an old acquaintance. I have heard her sing in her nightingale days. Ah! she had a throat of silver. It was a joy to sing with her."

"With her? Do you, too, sing?"

I wondered if he, too, had been upon the concert stage.

"I am said to sing fairly well. Eh, Albert?" going up to the boy and laying a hand upon his shoulder.

The young man started out of his abstracted mood. He made a gesture as though he would shake McKenna's hand from his shoulder, but at the same instant he looked up and met the doctor's eye. A curious cowed look came into Albert's face. He smiled a vacuous, timid smile.

- "This young lady wished to know whether I can sing," said Dr. McKenna.
- "Sing? The devil can not sing so sweetly," the boy said, in all seriousness.

Dr. McKenna smiled.

- "Nor could Pan play as well as Albert can—though all untaught and knowing no note of music. Play some of your dream music for us, Albert."
  - "I am tired," he said, sullenly.

"Play."

The one word was softly uttered, but it had in it a tone of commanding intensity. Albert turned at once to the piano and began to play. He was soon absorbed in his own music. He played very sweetly, with a touch light and expressive. The melody that dropped from his slender, girl-like fingers was weird and wild as the dance of waves on a windy moonlit sea. But I could not listen to it in peace. I was longing to get away.

At length Mrs. Wade's small servant lifted the portière and beckoned to Dr. McKenna. He rose and went into the next room.

Now was my chance. I jumped up noiselessly and glided out of the room, ran down the four flights of stairs rapidly and was in the street. I congratulated myself that Mrs. Wade did not know where I lived. I had never told her. I would not come to her house again. I would get some other teacher now that this man had found his way here.

As I was hurrying along the street on my way to the

station I heard a quick step behind me. Before I could turn around Albert was at my side.

"Oh, Marguerite!" he cried, breathlessly, "you were running away from Mephistopheles—that's right; but you were running away from Faust, and that is wrong. You must take him with you. You must help him to break his chain. Marguerite, I am going home with you."

"Oh, no, Albert," I cried in dismay. "Your guardian, if he is your guardian, will follow us and find you, and be angry."

"Let him be angry. He isn't as hurtful when he is angry as when he seems to be in a sweet humor. But he won't find us if we hurry. Here is the 'L' station. The cars take us to the railway depot, don't they?"

He seized my hand in his slim, supple fingers and fairly bore me along. He was laughing, but his eyes were eager and earnest.

"You are running away with me, aren't you, Marguerite?" he asked, when we were at last breathlessly seated in the cars, just as the train moved away from the station.

I was greatly worried. I knew nothing of this erratic young man, not even his name, only that he was a most interesting and innocent creature to look at. People, as we passed, turned to look at him. His face, with its pure pallor, and large blue eyes, and delicate, regular features, his mouth, sweet as any girl's, with a lovely curve of chin and throat beneath, was set off by his long, slightly curling golden hair.

What manner of being was he? Was he only very eccentric, or was he wrong in his head, either from a defect of nature or some malady of the brain that Dr. McKenna was trying to cure? Where had he been brought up? Not in any city, or where he saw people and mixed with them. I could tell that by his ignorance of every sort of convention.

His ease of manner was the ease of an unconscious child. How was he going to act? What would my mother—what would the people of the farm-house—think of my bringing him there, a young man—he was tall enough for a man, though he looked so boyish—who called me Marguerite and clung to my hand?

But my apprehensions on this score were relieved. After we were seated in the cars Albert behaved as quietly as need be. He looked about him with pleased interest, but that did not matter.

When we reached the railroad depot he bought his ticket—I had mine already—and found a seat for us.

He enjoyed the ride out across the country keenly, but he made no extravagant demonstrations. It is true he quietly possessed himself of my hand, which I was afraid to withdraw, he seemed such a child. I made an attempt to do it, and he looked at me with a hurt surprise.

"Don't you like me, Marguerite? Are you mad with me?" he asked.

I was afraid of some demonstration, so I let my hand stay in his. Nobody knew us. They would think he was my brother.

When we reached the railroad station, with the little village clustering about it, there seemed nothing for us but to walk to the farm-house, a mile away, for I was not expected to return so early.

Albert, however, looked around and found a conveyance—a rather rusty cab—but the horse was stout and spirited, and we rattled over the hills in lively style.

My comrade laughed gleefully.

"If old Mack could see us!" he cried. "Won't we have a nice time here in the country. Can you ride horseback? I'll see if there are any horses hereabouts."

I could not help catching something of his gay spirits. He was like a bird set free from a cage. A practical question troubled me however.

"But how can you stay here, Albert?" I asked. "You have no clothes with you—and—have you any money?"

"Money?" he laughed. "Lots of it sewed into the waistband of my trousers. You see I've outwitted old Mephisto. I've been saving up my pocket allowance. He gives me plenty of it. He's generous enough, though it's all mine, after all. He knows I like to throw dimes to the street boys and the organ players, and to buy books and fruit and candy. He gives me money whenever I ask for it, and he thinks I spend it all, but I've been saving it, and I managed to turn all the small change into bills, and I stitched them in my waistband. I can pay my board and buy me some clothes—don't you fear. Then when I run out I'll call upon old Mack. I shall have broken my chain, may be, if you will help me, Marguerite," with an appealing look.

"I wish you would tell me what you mean?"

"I wish I could," he answered, putting his hand to his head and sighing wearily, his whole face changing. "I wish I knew. I can't understand it. I was delicate from my birth. I had a spinal trouble. Doctor McKenna undertook to cure me after my mother died. She would never let him while she lived. She kept me out of his sight. I believe she hated him, and he had just made her marry him. 'Conjured her into it,' my old black mammy said. Old mammy Johanna believed he was the cause of my father's death.

"He doctored him in his last sickness, and when he had been dead only six months he married my mother. She was beautiful—a little, Spanish-looking beauty, with the whitest skin and blackest eyes you ever saw—but I don't think he cared for that. She had money, and they all thought she would have more when my grandmother died. My grandmother was very rich; but when she died she left it all to a grandchild she had never seen—a sickly girl, Doctor McKenna said. I was a child, but I remember

how he looked when he heard about the will. He looked like a devil, Marguerite. His eyes were like live devils.

"After that my mother drooped. I think he was unkind to her in secret, or he exerted some kind of evil influence over her. She kept me away from him. I lived with my governess and her mother in an out-house—a little cottage on the place. I lived there until a year ago. Doctor McKenna came and brought me away. I was with him in Florida, in an old house by the sea. He had a rich patient there he was attending. I never saw her or heard her name, but he was with her a great deal. He came with her here, I believe; then he went back and brought me. I have only been here a few months. He says he is curing me with his magnetic treatment. May be so; I don't have such strange spells as I used to have. But he has made me like a nigger slave, Marguerite. He's got such a mastery over me—1 do everything he wants me to. I never go anywhere by myself. He doesn't permit me to go; and I feel as helpless without him as a crippled man without his crutch. But I've been making up my mind to run away from him; and ever since I saw you and heard your voice—oh, your beautiful, kind voice!—I've wanted to get you to help me go away and keep away from him. If I could only throw off his cursed spell "-he threw up his arms, and his forehead contracted under his curls—"I will, if you'll help me!" he exclaimed, and then he laughed.

"That fellow that's driving thinks I'm crazy," he said, and he forthwith began talking to the man of the country of crops and horses, and showed himself so well informed that the shock-head, freckle-faced countryman told him he was the "knowingest city chap he had struck."

We soon reached our destination, and alighted in front of the house. When my landlord came out I had a moment of embarrassment, but Albert soon relieved it. I was infinitely surprised at the matter-of-fact way in which

he informed Mr. Grey that he had heard his house spoken of as a pleasant boarding-place, and had come out to see it. He was delighted with its appearance, and would engage board for a week at once. He could get his baggage at any time. He introduced himself as Albert Elan, a student of music; said that he had had "the pleasure of traveling out from the city in this young lady's company," and ended by paying his board for a week in advance. In this way he relieved me of all responsibility for his appearance here or his future conduct.

"Albert Elan is not mad," was my thought. "Queer and erratic though he may be, he has the instincts of a gentleman."

He proved it in his daily life at the cottage. He was strange in many of his actions and habits. He had fits of gloom and silence when he would not talk at all, and could only be soothed by my reading or singing to him. But he was a gentle creature, fond of children and animals, and tender-hearted and generous to a fault. You could not help loving him, though you often had to laugh at him and sometimes to weep for him, for he was a stricken creature, delicate in health and suffering from some strange, nervous malady.

He had once a singular seizure—a kind of cataleptic fit—which left him flaccid and melancholy.

Before this came on he was depressed, and once he looked at me wildly and whispered, with a short, convulsive laugh:

"I wish old Mephisto were here now. He'd set me right."

But he was haunted with the dread that Mephisto, as he called him, would find him.

He was nervous when he heard the sound of wheels or a step behind us, as we walked in the garden with little Nell clinging to his hand. She was very fond of him.

"He'll come some day," he said.

And the prophecy proved true.

### CHAPTER XIV.

HE came unexpectedly. As the days went by without a sign from him, we began to hope that he would not find us. Albert grew brighter and less fitful in his moods. A faint color came into his cheeks, and his appetite improved. He still eat hardly enough for a bird. Meat he would not touch. I have seen him shudder when a plate of rare roast beef was pressed upon him. He would make a meal of wild berries in the woods and be satisfied. And his only drink was water.

He turned the farmer's fattening chickens out of the coop on the sly, and when he went fishing he sat by me under the poplar-tree that overhung the creek, holding his rod in a careless manner while he read Shelley in snatches aloud to me. I noticed he got no "bites," and presently found out the reason. He did not have his hook baited.

It was horrible, he declared, to transfix a live worm with a hook. And as for the fish, the first perch I caught I unknowingly asked him to take it off the book. I had landed it triumphantly on the grassy bank. It was fluttering frantically. He obeyed. He drew the hook gently out of the gills of the "yellow-breast," and put the fish back in the water.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

He laughed, and then seeing my vexed look, he came and threw himself on the grass at my feet and took my hand.

"Hilda," he said, "you sha'n't be a murderess—the slayer of a little yellow perch, made to flash through the water like a sunbeam. I sent the little golden-breast back to his poor scared sweetheart. They were making love here in the shadow of the poplar-tree when your treacher-

ous bait tempted him. Hilda, with the brown, sweet eyes, don't look as though she could be so cruel. She can't catch any more fish. I've pulled the horrid hook off and thrown it away. I'm afraid," he went on, holding my hand hard, and looking up at me earnestly with his seablue eyes—"I'm afraid she might learn to play that game upon something that wasn't cold-blooded like the fish—something warm and throbbing—like this," and he put my hand suddenly over his heart.

It would have been like love-making in anybody except Albert. But in him it seemed only a graceful, fanciful child's way of talking and acting.

He would say such things to me before my mother and Nell, and before the farmer and his wife. I never took them seriously. Even my mother said it was only Albert's way; he was no more capable of passion than a boy of twelve, or the soulless brownie of the green wood.

It was a mistake; Albert Elan, under his irresponsible, child-like seeming, had a slumbering second nature of hot, wild, unreasoning passion, like others of his strange type—creatures possessed of gifts bordering on genius—but without balance. Gifted cranks they are called, magnetic, winning, yet beings to be dreaded, for usually there is somewhere in their natures the hidden dynamite, though the fatal spark may never reach it.

But of this in connection with Albert I never dreamed. He was a lovable boy, whose changing moods and queer, fanciful sayings interested and amused me—that was all. I pitied him because of his delicate frame, the strange spot of unsoundness in his mind, his lonely condition—without kindred or home-ties, except this guardian step-father, whom he feared and disliked. I wondered whether McKenna's influence over him were for good or for bad.

If his mesmeric or magnetic treatment controlled the cataleptic seizures at the time they occurred, did they not

do more harm, on the other hand, by weakening his nervous force and making him subservient to the doctor's will?

Undoubtedly he grew less nervous and excitable. His eyes exhibited less often that wild, dancing glimmer which gave them at times a fascinating but fearful beauty.

"It is because he is out here in the good, wholesome country that he improves so. I can see it every day," said my good mother, who took a maternal interest in the boy almost from the first. He would sit on the steps of our little porch and lay his head against her knees, begging her to smooth his hair, and let him try to fancy it was his mother.

But I felt somehow that Albert's improvement was due to his being away from Dr. McKenna.

"I shall be sorry when he finds him," I thought, "or when Albert is forced through want of money to let him know where he is."

Albert declared he would never go back and live under his surveillance again. He was getting strong enough to break the chain, he said. He was getting more will-power and more physical strength every day. He could support himself until he came of age. He would write sonnets to my eyes, and if he could not get pay for them, why, he would borrow a hurdy-gurdy and grind it on the street corner, or play monkey and pass around the cap.

In a year he would be of age, and then he would build a house with acres of roses around it on some fair island in the South, and mother and I and little Nell should live with him, and we would have a pleasure-boat and go sailing every day, and I should sing as we glided over the waters.

He would talk this way, prattling on for an hour, and charming mother and Nell by his extravagant poetical pictures of what he would do when he came into his fortune.

And oh, if only he could get that other great fortune of

nearly half a million that had been promised to him by his grandmother, and then she had willed it away from him—horrid old woman!—to a grandchild she had never seen—a puny girl that might die. He thought it was better she should die and let his grandmother's money come to him—for he knew so well how to spend it. After we had our island palace and the acres of rose garden and the pleasure-boat, he would build a home for ill-treated step-children, where they should have everything to make them happy.

A thought flashed through my mind as he spoke of the sickly girl-cousin who had inherited the fortune that was to have been his.

- "What is the name of your grandmother's heiress?" I asked.
- "Oh, she has a pretty name, though she's not pretty herself; she's a spiteful little cat, and she hates me—old Mack told me so when I wanted to see her. I have never seen her—and never will see her now, since she feels that way to me just because—so Doctor McKenna says—she thinks my mother poisoned grandmother's heart against her father. Grandmother would never see him, but it was because he did not marry the woman she had chosen for him."
  - "But the girl's name? You have not told me."
- "Haven't I? It is Elsie—Elsie Vaughn. My mother's family name is Vaughn."

Elsie Vaughn!

After the first startled utterance of that name I was silent through the rush of thought and conjecture. Here, then, was the secret of Dr. McKenna's interest in Elsie Vaughn! If she had died, her large fortune would have passed to this boy, his step-son. He was Albert's guardian and the master of Albert's will—as well say, then, that the fortune would have been Dr. McKenna's own.

Evidently Albert did not know his cousin was married, or even that she had been in New York. Dr. McKenna

had kept him in ignorance of her proximity, and he had given him a false idea of Elsie. He had had his reasons for not wanting friendly and confidential relations to be established between the two cousins.

And then there came to me the suspicion which had before made its way into my mind, that Elsie's ill health might have been owing, in part at least, to the peculiar treatment of her physician. What if he had purposely been undermining her health and Albert's? No need for drugs in his case. He understood how to drain the life forces by more subtle and insidious means.

Was Dr. McKenna, then, a murderer—a deliberate murderer of innocence for mercenary motives?

As the question shaped itself in my mind, I saw a shadow fall across the moonlit walk in front of the door.

We were sitting on the porch, enjoying the moonlight and the balmy air of the summer night.

Albert and Nell sat on the steps—my mother in her low, easy-chair beside them. Albert's arm was thrown across her lap. On the other side of him the child was sitting in her white frock, with the moonlight on her fair, eager face. She was leaning her elbow on Albert's knee, looking up into his face with wide eyes, for he had launched into a wonderful story of a spider and a "dirt-dauber." I had caught the drift of that story even while my thoughts were busy with conjectures about Dr. McKenna, for the story was relevant to the ideas that spun themselves in my brain. The boy was embodying in it his belief about the man who had enslaved him.

"Is it wrong to kill a spider?" he began.

He had stopped Nell from crushing under foot a green spider she had shaken from a flowered branch of the honey-suckle that covered the porch.

"Yes, indeed, it is wrong. I'll tell you how I was punished for killing a spider once when I was a little girl like you. I was turned into a spider all in a minute—a green

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spider, with four legs and two little eyes like specks of a diamond. I found myself in the heart of a big magnolia flower. Oh, I thought it was fine to have a palace with walls of perfumed ivory and a gold throne in the middle; but presently I heard a great buzzing, and in flew a long-bodied creature with shining wings and long legs—a dirt-dauber. Do you know him?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Nell. "He makes mud-houses on the walls—he sticks them there. He flies in through the window, takin' the mud plaster in his front hands; and he sings while he builds his house—he sings till your head turns round."

"That he does. He makes your head turn round. He makes the poor spiders' heads turn round, too, till they lose their senses. Did you ever see inside the dirt-dauber's house?"

"Oh, yes; I saw one yesterday. Mother knocked it down with a broom. It had lots of little rooms inside—and fat white grubs, and spiders that looked like they were asleep."

"They were asleep. The dirt-dauber had put them to sleep with his dizzy mesmeric buzzing, and he had brought them to his house in his front hands, as you say, and sealed them up in the little cells, to be eaten at his leisure. That's the way he did me—"

"Oh! and how did you get out?"

"My guardian angel brushed out the dauber's house with a point of her wing, and—"

He broke off abruptly, for the shadow that had been coming down the walk fell over the group on the steps, and my mother exclaimed:

"Why, here is Doctor McKenna!"

Albert jumped to his feet and made a quick step backward. He caught my hand and held it tight.

"I will not go back," he said, but his voice shook and his fingers trembled.

"Go back, my dear boy?" said the doctor, shaking hands with my mother. "Of course not. I don't want you to go back to the hot, dusty city this time of the year. This is just the place for you-nice and quiet-and you are here among friends. I quite approve of your being here with Mrs. Monteagle and my fair ex-patient, Miss Hilda. Yes, I am not forgetting you, Miss Nell," he went on, trying to draw the child to him as she shrunk away. "I have come out of the city, too, leaving business to take care of itself. I've taken board at the hotel of the little village at the station. They make good coffee there —gave me a juicy steak, too—and after I had eaten I walked out here to pay you a visit. You look quite idyllic, sitting here in the moonlight, listening to Albert's tales. Ah! Albert is a wonderful story-teller. He would have beaten the 'Arabian Nights' princess at her own game. So you got away from the mesmeric dirt-dauber when you were a spider, eh? I suppose there was no danger of the wicked dauber putting the guardian angel under his spell?"

"God forbid!" exclaimed Albert, looking at me and

gripping my hand so tightly that it hurt.

"What nonsense you are all talking!" said my dear, uncomprehending mother. "Hilda, why don't you get Doctor McKenna a chair?"

# CHAPTER XV.

THE dismay that fell upon two of our little circle on the night of Dr. McKenna's sudden appearance in our midst seemed, as time went on, to be unfounded.

Dr. McKenna's cloven foot was kept out of sight. He manifested no sinister purpose. He showed no disposition to interfere with Albert's actions, or to exert any influence over him.

He betrayed no curiosity about my affairs, asked no

questions, obtruded no sympathy—never mentioned the name of Gerald or Elsie.

He talked to us all together. He came often, usually dropping in upon us in the late afternoon or evening.

He always brought something—a bunch of flowers, a little box of French bonbons, a new book or magazine, from which he would read to us aloud.

I have said before that he had a voice of marvelous beauty—surely the sweetest, most expressive voice I ever heard.

His talk, too, was full of fascination. He had traveled much when he was younger, and he had observed men and studied the problems of life.

To us, whose lives had been narrow, and whose range of thought had been limited, it was a boon to listen to his broad ideas, to see through the pictures his words made for us the scenery and civilization of the great world.

But through all his fascinating talk, his dazzling philosophy, there sounded one dominant chord. It was Self.

Everything should be done for Self. We should seek our own good, our own advancement, our own happiness—that was our chief business in this world.

Suck the blossom of life of all its honey. It was only a blossom—to be nipped by death.

He believed in no hereafter. He would not say this openly, for fear of exciting my mother's displeasure or suspicion, but he intimated it in many subtle turns of his talk.

The supreme law was to be good to yourself—to get all the good for yourself possible—no matter about other people and their rights. Let them look out for themselves.

These views filtered through his conversation, particularly when he talked to me. I drank them in thirstily, though it increased rather than quenched the fire in my breast—the burning desire to snatch what I craved from Fate—Gerald and fortune.

The letters that came to me across the sea were not satisfying. They were affectionate, but they grew shorter and more hurried, with excuses about having so much to think of and attend to, and so little time to be alone. "Elsie is always beside him," was my bitter thought.

His scant mention of her seemed to me a suspicious avoidance, yet, when he did allude to her, the reference brought a pang.

I knew whenever a steamer from England was expected. I read the column of ship news eagerly, and for days before the time announced for a vessel to arrive I was in a state of feverish excitement. I went to the post-office myself, and was there when the mail was opened.

I had had no letter for several weeks; the steamer was delayed on her passage. I became too nervous to sit still. I walked to the village an hour before train-time, and sat waiting on the platform.

At last it came; the mail-bag was carried to the little post-office. As soon as it was opened I was there, and received my letter.

Only one! I was accustomed to getting quite a batch of letters at one time. This one letter was postmarked at a little town in Switzerland. I hurried away with it in my pocket, and as soon as I was out of sight I sat down upon a stone, tore it open, and devoured the closely written pages.

Only in one sentence was there mention of Elsie, and that seemed inadvertent. Gerald wrote:

"My uncle and aunt have gone on to Paris. We are lingering here, staying in this quaint Alpine village because the balsamic air and the goats' milk are so beneficial to Elsie's health."

Beneficial to Elsie's health! Oh, irony of Fate! Had I procured this state of things at all this sacrifice of feeling, and sent my husband away from me to benefit Elsie's

health? I had expected to read that she was failing, that she had succumbed to fatigue, that the artificial buoyancy of excitement had given place to prostration. Instead, my husband writes that he lingers among the Alps because it is benefiting Elsie's health!

He wrote too of walks in the valley, of viewing the sunset from a jutting crag. No doubt she was his companion. I could see him carrying her in his arms over the rough places, supporting her up the steep ascent. Was it possible she could climb the rocks—she, who could not mount the broad, easy stairs of Mlle. Nepeau's dress-making establishment when she went away?

I crushed the letter in my hand. My heart was torn with anguish and helpless jealousy.

"Curse her! curse her!" I muttered between my clinched teeth.

"Amen," softly said a sibilant voice behind me.

I faced around and saw Dr. McKenna.

"Why are you playing the spy upon me?" I demanded, angrily.

"The spy? This is a public road, and I am walking quietly along it. I heard you uttering a—prayer—and I made a response. It is an Italian custom."

"This is not Italy," I said, rising, and thrusting the letter in my bosom.

"No," he answered, slowly. "Italy is the land of hot feelings and bold deeds. Jealousy there is followed by active revenge, not curses merely."

I looked at him. Our eyes met, and I read his thoughts. He knew that it was Eslie Vaughn I had execrated. He knew that I was jealous of her. What else did he know? Did he guess all my secret? No; not fully. I felt assured of that by the way his live green eyes plunged down into mine. He was trying to find out all. He had not done it yet.

#### CHAPTER XVI.

THE sun had set when I reached the house. The full moon was rising.

"Come in to tea. We have cream and peaches!" cried Nell, from the door.

I could not face them all. Albert's keen eyes would be sure to see something amiss. I said I was not hungry; I had been eating fruit in the village. I sat down on a bench in a grape-arbor that joined the house.

After tea Albert came and sat by me, and began fanning me with a large tanyah leaf, as the night was very warm.

"Go in and play for me," I pleaded, for I felt it was impossible to talk to him. "Improvise something—something wild and fantastic, but not too gay.

"" Nor let thy notes of joy be first."

"Hilda, is there darkness in your soul that you quote Byron's poem?" he asked, anxiously, as he bent over me.

"Nonsense!" I laughed. "Why should my soul be dark? But the sky will soon be dark. See, the clouds are boiling in the west. Suit your music to the night, my improvisator."

He went into the little parlor, stepping through the window that opened to the ground, and sitting down before the cottage piano, began to play. Nell drew her hassock close to him, and my mother sat by the open window, plying her large fan of turkey feathers.

How warm the night was—warm and close and sultry to stifling. A dull languor possessed me. I put my locked hands behind my head and leaned back among the cool vine leaves. My forehead throbbed fiercely.

"Let me lay this cool, soft leaf of the tanyah on your forehead," I heard Dr. McKenna say.

It was the first intimation I had that he was near me. I started up from my reclining position, but the cool leaf, and his cool, soft fingers touched my temples at that instant. He gently pushed my head back among the interlaced vines and laid the broad leaf on my forehead, over my eyes.

I made no resistance beyond a gesture of the hand. His fingers touched my brow gently, smoothing down the leaf.

What else he did I do not know. I was weighed down with the fatigue of the long, hot walk and with the mental depression that followed the reading of Gerald's letter. I did not feel capable of resistance, scarcely of thought.

Albert was playing some dreamy, winding music. The dull pain in my head and heart seemed to wind round and round in time to it—round and round in bewildering mazes.

At last the pain ceased. There was only the bewildered going round in my brain, slowly, slowly. The music grew fainter. It sounded far away.

I was floating somewhere in midair, and there were arms around me and soft lips pressed to mine. Their breath seemed drawing something out of me. Was it my soul? I tried to resist. I struggled in the up-buoying arms, but it was in vain. They seemed to hold me gently but firmly. Softly, steadily they drew my soul out through my lips.

It was done. I seemed to fall from the loosened arms down, down through space.

I sprung to my feet with a cry. My head swam round. I fell back on the bench.

"The thunder waked you from your nap," said a voice, with a tone of mocking triumph vibrating through it. I saw McKenna standing before me. A shaft of light from the moon, not yet eclipsed by clouds, fell across his face. My God, what a face it was!—lighted up with malignant

joy, the green eyes flashing, the bearded lips apart, showing the gleaming teeth.

"What has happened?" I uttered, feebly.

- "You fell asleep, and the thunder waked you; that is all," he said.
- "Asleep! You—you put me to sleep! What have I said? Oh, wretch! what have you made me say?"
  - "I?" Then he smiled.
- "Hilda, don't get excited. There were just a few words—just three—I did not mind the rest—that escaped softly, tremblingly from those sweet lips, like a bee from a rose. I caught the truant words on my own breath. I shut them up between my lips and down in my heart. That is all. They are safe there."
- "What words? It is absurd to attach significance to what one says in sleep."
- "It was not sleep," he said, bending close to me. "It was the magnetic trance. I did produce it, and—I know all."

As he spoke there came another sharp peal of thunder; black clouds ingulfed the moon.

The double shock made me reel backward. He caught me in his arms.

"Don't fear me, Hilda," he whispered. "We must be friends. We must be allies. You will need me in time to come. And you can not resist me now. You are bound to me by the subtle, magnetic tie—the power of spirit over spirit. Hilda, we must understand each other."

I had freed myself from his arms, but he held my hand in the clasp of his firm, soft fingers. All around us was darkness.

The storm had extinguished every star. I looked through the window into the lighted parlor. It was empty.

"Albert fled at the first peal of thunder," said Dr. McKenna. "He is so sensitive to sound that the loud

crash sets every nerve quivering. He is in his room with a pillow over his head. Your mother and Nell have gone upstairs. They called you and I told them you had gone in. We are alone—alone with the wind and the rain. Hear the drops beginning to rattle on the leaves overhead. I love the storm and the darkness. My spirit has a chord that responds to the warring elements. So has yours, Hilda. Woman though you are, there is a strong fiber in your nature—a fiber akin to mine."

I shuddered within me as he claimed this spiritual kinship to me, and yet I did not shrink away from him. I did not withdraw my hand that he held as he talked.

There was a spell in his voice heard above the dash of the rain—in his eyes that shone in the flashes of lightning like baleful stars.

Had he truly established a power over me? Had he put his chain upon me, as Albert warned me he would do, or was I only stupefied by the effects of that mesmeric trance, and by the knowledge that my secret was in this man's keeping—the secret that held disgrace and ruin for Gerald?

# CHAPTER XVII.

"LET us go inside," he said, at length. "It is sweet to stand here with you in the rainy darkness, with the thick roof of leaves overhead, and watch the lightning play on your white face, my beautiful; but you will get wet, Hilda, and I want you to keep your health. Be good to yourself. Come in."

He drew me into the parlor, and turned round to close the shutters after us. Then he sat down by me on the oldfashioned lounge, upon which I had dropped through sheer inability to stand.

"Let us understand each other, Hilda," he said, turning his face upon me. "I have your secret. You shall have mine. I will wear no mask to you. Listen. You

know the key-note of my philosophy of life-I have told you before—Self. Self is the dominant note of every strong life. Bend everything to your individual interests. This life is all there is. Compass as much happiness and power as you can. Inside the law? you ask. No; inside detection. Laws are necessary to protect the weak. If one is strong and subtle, it is his right to transcend the laws and circumvent them. His care need only be to keep from being found out. Moral obligation and conscience is all bosh—old women's and clergymen's twaddle. So much to explain my theory of action. Now let me tell you my story—part of it at least. Did you guess I was ambitious? I knew you were when I first saw you. I have studied faces and heads to some purpose. I am ambitious in one thing. I want to be the founder of a new school of science. I have discovered a new force—rather, I have found a way to collect, to concentrate and apply a force that is as old as man—the wonderful, the mysterious brain or nerve-force. Talk of steam—of electricity—they are gross, slow and clumsy in comparison with this subtle, swift, all-powerful brain, nerve, soul-power—call it what you please. When I shall carry my discovery into effect it will do away with such crude helps as the telegraph and the telephone. It will do away with the necessity for printing, or for speech. It will annihilate space and time. It will bring us in connection with the star worlds above yonder canopy of storm," flinging out his long arm in the direction of the window, through which the black sky was seen in the glare of the lightning.

He went on, his voice low and inthralling:

"My discovery will do away with disease and pain and the necessity for drugs. It will—listen to me, Hilda—it will do away with death itself. Man need not grow old or die when he can renew himself through this soul-battery. It must be at the expense of other life—brute life and the life of inferior human creatures. These lives must be sacrificed in order to gain the supply of vital force necessary for the battery. But this is no matter. Think how many human animals there are taking up space and breath on this earthly globe who are of no manner of use whatever. I would put these to use. I would drain their vital forces for my battery. As the galvanic battery draws the electric force from the air and concentrates it, so my infinitely finer machine shall draw and concentrate a far subtler and more wonderful power—concentrate it that it may feed finer brains and assist them in opening up communication with God-like beings through the scheme of spirit-telegraphy.

"Hilda Monteagle, when I perfect my great discovery, gold will be poured in heaps at my feet, fame will ring my brow with the crown of immortality, the rulers of the world will bow the knee to Erastus McKenna."

The green lights in his deep-set eyes outdazzled the lightning. I gazed at him in dumb amaze. The horrible beauty of Satan sat on his swarthy brow; his voice went through me, low yet piercing, like the final quivering note of a violin in a master's hand.

It darted through my brain that this man was mad—that the fire of insanity burned under his cold, calm exterior; but the thought took no lodgment in my spell-bound being. I was under the power of that green, glittering eye. I listened, fascinated, wondering—for the time believing. He went on, a shadow clouding his face:

"But to perfect and apply this great discovery—this mode of collecting and concentrating nerve-force—requires money; and the influence that money will give. Else I could not even secure a hearing in regard to my scheme. I must have money—millions of money. But give me half a million and I will soon increase it twenty-fold. My first step must be to obtain the half million. How should it be done? The easiest way was to marry a rich woman. I married one. She had nearly the requisite half million, but unfortunately it was not in hand. A life lay between

her and this fortune—a life I could not touch, though it was infirm and feeble; for her old mother, suspicious bedlam that she was, would not let me come into her presence after the first week of my marriage. She said there was a devil in my eyes, and warned her daughter against me. This daughter-my wife-was Albert's moth-She was a widow with this child when I married her -a pretty, weak-minded creature. I did not love her, but I did not kill her, as her mother would have it. At least, I did not kill her purposely, though I may have experimented too freely upon her, and drained her small vital force before I was aware of it. I certainly would not have killed my goose before the golden egg was laid. She died while her old mother was still living. Still the fortune would be mine, for it would pass to Albert at his grandmother's death, and I was Albert's step-father and guardian. There was only one other natural heir-and this was a girl—the child of the old woman's only son, whom she had driven from her with curses because he married the daughter of a man who had jilted her in her youth.

"She had refused to see this son when he was on his death-bed. She had refused to see or to hear about his child. It was not the least probable that she would leave her fortune to this daughter of a woman she hated and a man she had cursed.

"But it is the unexpected that always happens. The old woman's end came at last. The will was opened and it was found that her vast fortune was bequeathed to this granddaughter she had never seen. Albert was cut off with a paltry twenty thousand. Her malignant hate of me was the cause. She said she had altered her will to prevent her money falling into the hands of a fortune-hunter, who had caused the death of her daughter and would begar her grandson.

"I was struck powerless with rage and disappointment at first. Then I rallied and I determined to continue the fight. I keep a bull-dog grip upon any purpose I fasten my will upon, and I resolved to have this fortune. Obstacles only inspired me to overcome them. And I was further actuated by a desire to revenge myself upon the malignant hag who had fooled me.

"I would seek the young heiress of this fortune I had lost. She was Elsie Vaughn. You have guessed this before. I found that by a decree of the will the inheritance would fall to Albert if Elsie should die unmarried before she came of age. If she married she could make a will in her husband's or child's favor. Failing to do this, the money would revert to Albert if she died after her marriage.

"I see by your face, Hilda, that this proviso is news to you. But it is true; unless Elsie makes a will leaving her money to her—I mean your husband—it will fall to my step-son, and your sacrifice—your bold scheme—will come to naught.

"But, to go on with my story—I see you are interested. I have said I set out to seek Elsie Vaughn. I found her living with only an old maid relation. I had heard she was very fragile. I found her frail indeed, but not organically diseased. I determined to become her physician. I won over the old maid by presenting her with a Maltese cat. I managed to throw doubt upon the skill of her doctor, and got him dismissed. I tried my peculiar treatment upon Elsie. It acted like a charm. It was just what she needed—that pumping of fresh vital force into her nerves. It made her sleep, gave her appetite and strength. I kept this up until I had confirmed the two women in the belief of my skill, and then I gradually reversed the treatment. I began to draw off her vital force. I could have done it more rapidly, but I was afraid of losing their confidence. Then I found a keen interest in experimenting—in exercising this power to add or to subtract life. There was plenty It was some years yet before Elsie Vaughn would be of age. Before that time came there would be no Elsie Vaughn. Her small stock of life would have been transferred to my own being, and her money to Albert."

"Horrible!" I uttered.

He looked at me and smiled in his slow, sinister way.

"Horrible, is it? Is it much more of a crime to kill Elsie Vaughn, as I proposed to do, than to wish and long for her death as you do? The deed is a little more active than the wish, and requires a little more nerve, that is all."

My eyes dropped to the floor. I felt that his reasoning

was true.

"Neither wish nor deed is a crime," he went on.

"There is no such thing as crime—until it is found out.

Laws, as I have said, are only to preserve a general order in the world of men. One may leap over the barrier of law, if he is bold and cunning enough, and do no wrong, because there is no such thing as moral wrong. All the harm that can come is being found out and punished by the laws that men have made for convenience' sake.

"So neither you nor I have done wrong. What is the life of that puny girl to mine—to my brain that holds the secret of a discovery that shall revolutionize the world? Her paltry life lies between me and my purpose—I brush

it away as I would a fly.

"Why did I not brush it away at once? Why did I linger over my work? That was a weakness; but as I told you, I was experimenting; and then—let me confess it—I found that brushing away this fragile vitality was not as easy as I had expected. One strong chord held Elsie Vaughn to life. It was her love for her fiancé—the handsome boy she had been betrothed to by her mother and his father. This remembrance of Gerald Oldridge, and this hope of seeing him and becoming his wife, was the one strong impulse—the pivot of her being. All her dreams and hopes and fancies clustered around it. She lived upon it. For it was this that gave her the intense craving for

life which made her resist my power so wonderfully. I am mortified to confess to you that I never once succeeded in getting her will fully subject to mine; and I feel sure this was owing to the counteracting influence of her love for Gerald, and her craving to see him.

"Her aunt was in the meantime seconding this craving by urging that she should come to New York. At last my passion for analyzing causes, and my fear of exciting suspicion made me give my consent, as her physician, for Elsie to go. But before I did this I took a trip to New York alone, that I might see young Oldridge and study his character. I did see him, and read him through and through.

"It was not hard to do. His is not a deep or a broad nature. I said to myself: 'Here is a young man brought up inside the strait and narrow code of morality. He has a conscience; he has his ideas of honor and so-called manly self-respect. He will not marry a woman—though she be an heiress—whose appearance excites in him only pity. He will not sell himself for a price where he can give no affection. He will let Elsie Vaughn understand that he can not marry her. The shock will snap the staff she leans on. It will break that strong chord of hope she clings to, and I can soon do the rest. She will yield at once to my treatment.'

"You understand now my motive in letting my patient come to New York. It was a mistaken step, but the error was not in my judgment. I had diagnosed young Oldridge correctly. He would never have married that ghastly, stricken girl. He wanted money, but he had not the nerve to get it in that way. But you had, Hilda. You had the nerve of a Judith. You are a woman after my own heart, and so I forgive you for thwarting my plan. It was you who influenced Gerald Oldridge to consent to marry Elsie Vaughn.

"The announcement of that consent came to me like a thunder-bolt. It seemed a death-blow to my plans. I

was desperate. I determined to alter my mode of treating her at once. I would apply the exhaustive system as strongly as I could. I did so—once only. My patient, pallid, exhausted, whispered to her aunt a plea that she should not see me again. Another physician was sent for. He pronounced me a charlatan, and the doors of the Oldridge mansion were closed upon me.

"Did I lose hope? No; an ordinary man would have given up the game, but not I—Erastus McKenna. I was still determined to win, though I did not see how it could be done. Chance threw me in contact with you. I studied you that day as you stood on the pier, watching, as I was watching, the sailing away of the bridal pair. I read pain and anxiety in your look. There was the tigress flash in your eyes, too, when Oldridge put his arm around his bride. I said to myself: 'That girl has a secret. It may be of use to me to find it out. Hers is no common character. She is strong and daring—the sort of soul I want to have and hold. I will pluck out the heart of her mystery.'

"Well, I have accomplished my purpose. I know your secret, as you know mine. You have made the man you love commit a crime—as the law goes—to obtain the money that would give you luxury and social position and the privilege openly to enjoy his love. You have done this, and your well-laid scheme, like mine, has 'gone aglee.' Elsie Vaughn will live; you will miss the fortune, and you

will lose your husband."

"Never!" I cried, starting to my feet. "The fortune I may miss, but I will not lose Gerald. He is mine, heart and soul."

He smiled—that slow, sardonic smile that made my flesh

creep.

"We shall see," he said. "My insight into the human heart is deeper than yours. You are destined to a terrible disappointment. This man is the slave of convention. His is a timid, ease-loving nature. He will cling to the woman

who is his wife in the sight of the world, and he will let you go to the wall."

"Hush!" I cried, stamping my foot. "You are judging him falsely. You shall not say that of Gerald Oldridge! He is the soul of honor and constancy—"

That smile again! It was like a cold hand on my heart.

I dropped back into the seat I had risen from.

"Why have you told me all this?" I murmured. "What can be done?"

"There! You are reasonable," he said, laying his soft, cushiony palm over my trembling hands. "Listen to me now quietly. I have told you all this because, for one thing, it is a craving of human nature to have some one to confide in. You will feel a relief now that I know your secret. I stole it from you; and so I have given you mine—secret for secret. Now for my chief reason. Through this secret of yours I will get the fortune I crave—old Grandmother Vaughn's hundreds of thousands, which she swore I should never touch. I will get it yet—if you will be my ally."

"What do you mean?"

"I am about to tell you. When this precious pair returns, this Elsie will be more than ever wrapped up—body and soul—in Gerald Oldridge. Her health will be improved, but she will not be strong. She will never be strong, though if she is shielded from all painful shocks and fed and pampered with Gerald's affection, she will live to a good old age. But when the terrible truth that she is no wife—that Gerald Oldridge has deceived her and that he is a criminal—when this is dashed in her face, she will not live five days after Gerald Oldridge's felony has been exposed."

"Who will expose that felony?" I asked.

"Who! You, Hilda—you, his wronged wife—will denounce Gerald Oldridge."

"Never-never. Even if I did not love him with every

fiber of my soul, I would not denounce him for what I caused him to do. The sin was mine."

He turned on me with the enraged, baffled look of a mad dog that jerks at his chain.

"You must, you shall denounce him!" he hissed. "I

myself will expose his crime."

"You can not prove it. You can not prove that he was ever married to me. There were no witnesses; there is no record; there was no license. By the law of New York State, none of these were needed. He has never acknowledged me as his wife. I will deny that I am. I will swear that I was only his mistress."

He looked at me in amazement. Rage and disappointment made him livid. He gnawed his lip in his effort to control himself. Presently he said, with calm scorn:

"What a fool a woman is when she loves! A brute would have more sense than to ruin itself for no end whatever."

His cold tones and cynical utterance had a calming effect

upon me. When he next spoke I listened quietly.

"What then do you propose to do in the event of Elsie's continuing to live? You will give the pair your blessing, I suppose, and let them quietly enjoy their wedded bliss."

I felt the hot blood surge to my face.

- "No!" I cried. "If Elsie Vaughn is living when Gerald returns, the scheme will be abandoned. He will leave her, and we two will go somewhere else. The world is wide. I will follow where he goes, and we will begin life anew. Somewhere in the new, wide west we can live and be happy."
- "And if he refuses to go with you—if he refuses to leave his rich wife?"
  - "He will not refuse. I have told you that."
- "You have indeed, very impressively; but nothing is more uncertain than human actions—than a man's actions where a woman is concerned. I repeat my suggestion—if

he should refuse to leave Elsie Vaughn for you, would you then denounce him?"

"Yes," I cried, a lava tide of jealousy suddenly flooding my heart, "yes."

"Swear it."

"I swear it!" and I tossed my arm upward as calling Heaven to witness.

His eyes gleamed with exultation. He seized my arm

and pressed his lips on the bare flesh.

"This seals the oath," he said. "And now, Hilda," he went on, clasping my hand in both his, "be at peace. You are wearing yourself out with the fierce intensity of your emotions. Be strong. Life has many possibilities for you, even though you lose the love of this one man."

"I care for nothing else. Life would be nothing to me

without his love. Wealth-fame would be dross!"

He eyed me in silence. Wonder and a sort of scornful

pity were in his look.

"Girl! girl!" he cried, "no man on earth is worth such self-immolation! No man like Gerald Oldridge could understand or appreciate it! Take my advice. You have rich gifts. Make the most of them. You have strong feelings and sympathies, a vivid imagination—these qualities will make you a writer of power and popularity. Write a novel, Hilda. Fling yourself into it. Pour into its pages the hot tide of emotion, the sparkle of fancy, the light of imagination that is in you. Write a book. It may not bring you much money, but it will give you a purpose—an outlet for these feelings and energies that fever all your being. And it will bring you recognition from a few whose praise is worthy. You will have their acknowledgment of your gift."

"And Gerald's?"

"And Gerald's," he said, with his slow smile of scorn, "He will see you through the eyes of other men, and be proud of you. Men of his nature are proud of a woman in

proportion as the world thinks well of her. There, I have made you angry with me again. Forgive me, as I have forgiven you for so much. Let us be friends. The bond of a secret—guilty as the world holds it—is between us. Give me your hand. I am no sensualist, Hilda Monteagle. My soul scorns the gross connection of flesh. No woman can love this ugly face of mine, and I seek to win no woman's carnal love—mine be the power of soul over soul. Ours be the higher bond, my Hilda—the comradeship of the finer inner being. Give me your hand upon it, girl of the eagle name and the eagle ambition."

My hand was laid in his. He folded it in his soft fingers, looking at me with his eyes glowing like living emeralds. A final peal from the scattering cohorts of the storm shook the walls about us.

"Our compact is sealed and attested," he said.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER all I ought to be glad that Erastus McKenna came into my life. His words roused something in me that else might never have been wakened. They stirred the sleeping sense of the power that was in me—the divine gift of imagination and of expression.

"Write a book. It is in you to do it." For days his words echoed in my ears. I pondered upon them, at first idly, then intently, until a sudden resolve burned in my brain, and I said, "I will do it."

This purpose, put at once into effect, saved me from much suffering that trying summer. "Get work," said Elizabeth Browning. "It is better than what you work to get." Never were truer words uttered. Work is the great panacea for aching hearts and restless souls.

The gift of imagination and of expression had been born in me. Its natural outlet was in the art of writing, not of painting. I had tried this latter, but with faint success.

But I had found it easy to write out my thoughts and fancies. I had written verses from my childhood, and little sketches and stories, which I read to my mother, and later to Gerald and Nell. Their praise had encouraged me to write for the public eye. I sent a few stories to papers and second-class magazines, and they were, with a single exception, promptly accepted. But the pay was small. I could not depend upon it for the support of myself and those dependent upon me. I had no time to take pains with my work, and I could not bear to have it crude and unfinished. So I had given up the hope of having literature for my profession. Only now and then I wrote something—some bit of rhyme that broke its way out of my heart, whether I would or no, or some short sketch—dramatic or weird.

Now, however, I had leisure for better things—and I had a powerful incentive outside the instinctive longing for expression. If I wrote something that would take the uncertain public—something that would sell—I would have money to give Gerald—money that would help him to begin life somewhere else; for, of course, he must leave his uncle's and quit New York after he had left Elsie, and he would leave Elsie so soon as it was sure she would live.

I hoped he would leave her at once. I intimated as much in my letters; but I had to write guardedly, and he was, I thought, even too guarded in his own letters, for each one left me in doubt about Elsie. Was she slowly dying, or was she gradually recovering through the elixir of love and the effect of change and travel?

Well, I would know after awhile. Two months had not yet gone by. The suspense was torturing, but here was a means to allay it. I would act on Dr. McKenna's suggestion—I would write a book.

The plot of my story came to me in a very strange way. My brain was full of plots, but none had satisfied my ideal. I dismissed them one by one as too commonplace or too hackneyed. I was running them over in my mind one day —one sultry afternoon—as I sat in an old, half-ruined summer-house at the back of the garden. Albert was there, but his presence was no intrusion. He sat fingering his violin, in his usual dreamy, abstracted way, evoking some slow minor melody.

Tired with thinking, I leaned my head against the vine-muffled post and dropped to sleep. A sudden rain came up. A great drop splashing on my cheek startled me out of my short sleep and broke the thread of a vivid dream. I sat up, unable at once to shake off the spell.

"Hilda, what is the matter? You look as white and startled as if you had seen a ghost," Albert said.

I answered:

"I have had a dream—oh! so strange, so life-like, I can hardly believe I have not been living through it."

Then I told him my dream. It was a story of a soul insnared—of a strong temptation—wrong-doing—a sin long hidden under a fair life and a fair face—of remorse aroused by the touch of late-coming love—of repentance and expiation.

He listened as I recounted the incidents of the strange drama that had swept through my brain in that five minutes' sleep, though it had taken an hour to relate them. When I had finished, he sat silent, with his hand twitching in mine. His sensitive being was touched by the wild pathos of the story I had told.

"Hilda," he said at last, "if you could write that dream as you have told it, it would make you famous."

"I will write it," I answered, quickly. "It is an inspiration. I will take it as the plot of my story—my book that shall be."

I began that very night to write the story I had dreamed in the old summer-house.

It grew under my pen. The plot widened, the incidents thickened, the characters developed; but never could I

breathe into it all the intensity of feeling, all the weird sense of inevitable, all-compelling, overhanging destiny that belonged to the dream.

Who can do this? Who can reproduce the emotional intensity, the sense of fatality of a dream? Who can love, enjoy, and suffer in every-day life as he does when his senses are shut in sleep and a dream weaves its wild drama in his brain?

It is a foretaste of the intensity with which we shall suffer or enjoy in the life to come. It is a proof that we are immortal—that there is a soul and a future life, though so many thinkers deny it in these latter days.

I worked with feverish energy. I wrote with a flying pen at first, then transcribed what I had written with careful corrections. I would spare no pains to make my novel a success.

I must win fame and money for Gerald's sake—that I might make up to him, as much as possible, for the harm I had wrought him—for the sacrifice he would have to make in breaking off forever from old friends and associations and beginning life anew—beginning it far from New York. The world was wide. He would leave Elsie—without a word to her or to any one—he would simply disappear. In some other part of the world—in California, in Mexico, or in Europe, we would pitch our tent and forget the mistakes of the past in the happiness of living together. Ah! how happy I would be if I could put a good sum of money into my darling's hands—money of my own earning—to help him establish himself. Then I would not feel quite so remorseful at having spoiled his life by my sin.

And so with this purpose before me—with this to stimulate me—the hope of winning money and fame, that Gerald might be proud of me, and that I might be a help to him, I wrote my story.

I shut myself in an attic room upstairs where the dust lay thick on the old books and broken furniture and the spiders spun their webs. I turned a deaf ear to Nell's pleadings to come and go fishing or berrying with her and Albert. I scarcely heard the birds twittering in the boughs of the locust-tree that grew close to my window. Albert's soft playing in the room below soothed and helped me. I knew he sympathized with my work and my hopes, though he did not dream of the purpose that inspired my brain and impelled my hand.

At last, one day—seven weeks after it was begun—the story was finished. I wrote "finis" with a trembling pen, then I gathered all the sheets together and went downstairs.

Dr. McKenna sat in the parlor alone. He came over from the village almost every day at this hour—just before sunset—and sometimes he would take me to ride beside him in the old-fashioned buggy he had picked up in the little town.

There was a charm in his society. I did not like him; there were looks and utterances of his that made me recoil from him in disgust and horror; and yet I was drawn to him by some subtle bond. He knew my secret; he understood the trial I was passing through as no one else could understand it. There was a comfort in being with one from whom you need have no concealments. I often felt my whole being tingle with irritation when my mother looked at me in her mildly questioning way.

Dr. McKenna never once alluded to this secret he had stolen from its hiding-place in my heart upon that night of storm. He did not mention Gerald's name. He talked of other things—talked in a quiet, restful, yet fine and subtle way that was made more fascinating by the music of his voice. I had never told him that I had taken his advice and was writing a book, but I was sure he knew it, as he knew everything concerning me.

I came up to him with the manuscript of my completed novel in my hand, and said:

"It is finished, Doctor McKenna. Here is my book the book you told me to write."

A light came into his eyes. He took the great pile of written sheets that I held out to him.

"I will read it," he said, "and I will see that it is published at once."

"How do you know it will be accepted?"

"I do know it. I know what your gift is, and I know you have worked well. You have worked hard, Hilda," he went on, looking at me. "The roses have dropped from your cheeks, and your eyes look larger than ever. You must rest and recruit now. Yes, I know your story will catch the ear of the public. You have an inthralling plot to begin with."

"What do you know of the plot of my story?" I asked,

in surprise.

He smiled.

"I know it well; it is a mixed web—woven of hidden crime, deception, love, and explanation."

"Albert has told you."

"Albert told me nothing. You know that Albert seldom talks to me. But your plot came to you in a dream, did it not?"

"It did," I said, wondering. "In a dream, as I slept for five minutes in the old garden summer-house."

"What if I, sitting at my window, sent that dream to you in a flash of spirit-telegraphy? Know you not that I have fastened telegraphic wires from your being to mine, my Hilda."

"Then the book is yours—not mine. Take it and throw it in the fire."

"Not so. It shall be published. It shall bring you fame and money. It is yours. I could not have written it to save my life. I have only held out to you the goblet, and you have filled it with the wine of your genius. Go

now and take your ride. Let Albert drive you. I think you would rather have his company than mine to-day."

He was right. I could not have borne to sit beside him just now. I was startled—filled with something akin to terror as I realized how this man held the key of entrance to my inner being; how I could have no secrecy—no privacy of soul or mind. Would he not use his power to compel me to betray Gerald? I had promised—sworn to betray him if he did not give up Elsie and return to me. Ah! but I would never be required to keep that oath. My husband's heart was mine—all my own. He would be true to me. What he had done was through me. The crime was mine. He was true as steel—to his plighted word and to his love.

## CHAPTER XIX.

I saw no more of Dr. McKenna until the next day. I was walking in the garden at nightfall when I heard his step behind me, and saw his ungainly shadow projected on the walk before me by the rising moon.

He spoke to me, and then walked at my side in silence for a few minutes before he said, abruptly:

"Hilda, I congratulate you. Your novel is even better than I believed it would be. It is more realistic; there is more fervor of expression. So much is due to your having loved. You women write and act better after you have passed through the fiery furnace of passion. It is the price an artist must pay. But is this your first story—have you written nothing before?"

"I have been writing little stories and sketches ever since I could shape my letters," I said. "My mother has rolls of my early scribblings. My father wrote a book, and published many fugitive pieces."

"Then you came rightly by your gift. It is an inheritance. His genius has reached its finer flowering in his

child. To-morrow I will put your manuscript in the hands of a publisher to be read. I feel sure it will be accepted. If this is not I will have it published at my own expense."

"Indeed, you must not do this," I cried, quickly.

He looked at me and smiled. I felt my will melt under that look. I had a wretched consciousness that Dr. McKenna was strengthening the bond between us by acts that brought me under obligation to him. And he can have but one motive, I thought. He means to use me in his fixed—his monomaniacal determination to get possession of Elsie's fortune. This must be the secret of his interest in me. He is not in love with me. A man with an eye like that could never love.

## "His heart is cold To all but gold."

He wishes to obtain a strong hold upon me to further his schemes. I must beware of him. I must break his spell some way.

My task was finished. I had no longer an absorbing work to ward off anxiety, and it came back to me with greater intensity. For now three months had passed since Gerald left me—three months—and Elsie Vaughn still lived. If I could believe McKenna, it was likely she would continue to live. My scheme had probably failed. There was still a hope, for Gerald's last letter, dated from Baden-Baden, had said: "Elsie is suffering greatly from fatigue and debility, and we will stay here and rest. If she is well enough for me to leave here, I will make a flying visit to Rome."

My answer had been: "Go; for you must see the Eternal City. I wish I could stand by your side before the Coliseum—but, oh! do not stay: come back—come back to your friends—your friend. We will give up all erration

schemes for wealth, and be content with living and working together."

This was as much as I dared say, for we had agreed before he left that my letters to him must be cautiously worded. There must be no hint of the relation between us, or of the understanding about Elsie. It would be too imprudent under the circumstances. He was going about all the while; he was traveling part of the time with his aunt and uncle—whose name was the same as his own—and a letter might fall under eyes it was not meant should see it. My letters were signed Harry, and were meant to express only the friendship of a devoted comrade of his own sex; but this idea was often lost sight of, and a chance reader of the letters would have thought me a very ardent comrade indeed.

He did not need to use so much caution; but his nature was infinitely more circumspect than mine, and he never addressed me as wife. It was always, "My dear Hal," or "My dear little boy." He had given me this name long ago—in playful allusion to my short, boyish curls.

The letter from Baden-Baden, telling of Elsie's indisposition and of his wish to pay a flying visit to Rome, came to me while I was writing my story—in the "thick" of that task—when I was hardly taking time to eat and sleep enough to keep up my strength. It was the last line I received from him in many days. I became intensely anxious. As days grew into weeks, and one steamer after another arrived in port and still no news from Gerald, I grew half wild with suspense and dread. I came to town and bought a great roll of French papers, and pored over them, reading carefully column after column of the society gossip and the letters from summer resorts.

At last, in a gossipy letter from Baden-Baden, I came upon a paragraph about an "interesting little American bride, very rich but in very frail health; so delicate that she looks like a melting snow wreath, but so sweet and

patient and gracious that she wins all hearts. She is very much in love with her handsome, broad-shouldered husband," said the letter-writer. "It is quite touching to see how she clings to his strong arm, and he, I must add, is very attentive to her."

I crushed the paper in my hand, all the blood in me rushing to my throbbing head. The picture that came before me was maddening. The "interesting bride" clinging to the arm of her handsome, attentive husband! Attentive! For a moment the bitter tide of jealousy surged hotly through my veins, then came cooler reflection. Of course he must be attentive to her—his bride. He must keep up the semblance of a loving bridegroom. It was I who had thrust the situation upon him; and gratitude for her love and her generous lavishness, pity for her, remorse that he had deceived her, and must soon desert her if she lived—these would make a hard man attentive, and Gerald was tender and chivalrous in his nature.

Oh, I had no right to feel bitter against Gerald. He was only doing as I had persuaded—had forced him to do. But he must not keep it up. I could bear it no longer. And now I had found that I could make money. We could live without Elsie's fortune. Let her keep it; let her live—only let me have my Gerald back with me.

Why did he not write? Was she worse—dying—and he attending her day and night—waiting for the issue before he wrote or telegraphed? Yes, perhaps this was the cause of his silence. I must wait; I must try to bear this horrible suspense.

I did wait—until weeks had gone by. Then I sent a message across the cable-wires—just the question, "What is the matter?" It was some days before a reply came. It was dated from Rome. It read:

<sup>&</sup>quot;Have been quite ill. Am recovering. Will return on the 'Etruria' middle of September."

He had gone to Rome and taken the malady that lurks in the miasma of the outlying marshes—the well-known Roman fever. He had been ill, and I was not there to nurse him. Well, thank Heaven, she was not there, either. He had left her at Baden-Baden. That was what he had said he would do. Of course she would not risk herself in Rome during the summer, even if she had been able to travel. Perhaps he had left her for good, or very likely he had taken this pretext of going to Rome to break off their association forever, as I had intimated he must do in my letters. He was coming home alone—coming home to me—and we would at once go away together—somewhere—to the West or the far South—and begin our married life anew.

I forgot all the croakings of McKenna, all the jealous fears that had assailed me. A rush of joy sent a flush to my cheek and made the paper tremble in my fingers.

Dr. McKenna saw my agitation. He had been watch-

ing me ever since the dispatch was put into my hand.

"The happy bride and bridegroom are homeward bound, I presume?" he said with his mocking smile. I made no answer. I was too happy now for his cynical tone to jar upon me. I was saying to myself: "Let him but come back, all things will then follow as I will. My hold upon him is strongest."

Dr. McKenna touched my hand. He was bending close to me. "Don't forget your promise—your oath," he said. I turned away my look from his face—from the sight of the impish soul peering through those pale eyes.

"I will not forget," I answered, "but there is no use

in remembering it. Gerald will never be false to me."

He half shut his eyes with that peculiar shadow of a smile hovering about his mouth.

"Good. You will not forget," he said, and went away. We had moved back into the city, taking a flat upon Forty-second Street. Albert was no longer with us. A

change had come over this unfortunate one. It came while I was so absorbed with my story. He was lonely and unhappy, particularly after he had had one of those strange seizures—epileptic or cataleptic in their nature—which always affected his spirits as well as his mind. He fell once more under Dr. McKenna's treatment. Without doubt, the man again began to experiment upon him, testing how far he could deprive him of any will power of his own—experiments that unstrung his nerves, and made him a passive instrument in McKenna's hands. The old bondage was re-established. I saw it, when at last—my book completed—I came out of the cloud-land of fancy, and had leisure to look at my poor friend. His eyes met mine with a pitiful reproach and a vague pain in their depths.

"You left me," he whispered, pathetically, "and now

I belong to him again. I wear his chain."

When we broke up our quiet little establishment at the farm-house, and I hurried my mother into the city, Dr. McKenna took charge of Albert, and carried him back to the gloomy old house in Beekman Place. He had been once to see us. His manner had grown absent-minded and erratic again. His eyes wandered around with a strange look in them. Sometimes they would rest on me with an appealing expression that touched me with remorse. The boy had clung to me in the way that one clings to a hand held out when one is drowning, and I had failed him.

I had been too absorbed in my own anxiety, my own passion, to think of this poor soul adrift, and to help him assert his individuality against the power of his subtle guardian.

Yet, strangely enough, though his mind had clouded over again in other respects after he came back under McKenna's domination, his musical genius seemed all the more wonderful. It was as though this was the only way his soul could rise and be free—through music. I think I never heard such melody as dropped from his fingers the

day he came to see us. Beautiful, dreamy notes, then soaring, bird-like strains. But at the close he rose like a cowed child and said he must hurry back.

"He is pulling me," he said. "I feel the chain. You

remember what Juliet says:

"I would have you go,
And yet no further than a wanton's bird,
Who lets it hop a little from her hand
Then plucks it back by the string."

I'm the bird, Hilda, and my wing is broken."

He burst into tears, like a child, and when I tried to soothe him he clasped his arm tight about my neck and kissed me.

"Take me from him. Keep me. Make me yours!" he said, passionately, and as he clung to me, and I stood pitying him and not knowing what to do, his guardian entered. At the sound of that stealthy step the boy turned around; a frightened, pale look came over his face, and he ran out like a hunted thing.

Dr. McKenna smiled. Oh, that slow, half-mocking, half-malicious smile!

"You have made a conquest," he said. "But I can't give you the 'changeling boy,' my Titania, unless you promise to give me a goodly share of his fortune."

"What fortune?" I asked. "I did not know Albert

had a fortune."

"It is but a modest one now. It will be a noble one though when he falls heir to his cousin Elsie."

"So you still hope to have that coveted money? It is for this you wish to keep poor Albert bound to you body and soul?"

He nodded his head.

"That money will yet be mine," he said. "With that money I shall make my dream a splendid reality. Then I can return it twofold to the boy, and I can ring this brow of yours with a diamond coronet, Hilda, if—"

He did not finish the sentence. He broke off suddenly and said, glancing around:

"You are looking for Prince Charming. The room is decked with roses, I see. And you—how pretty you are in your new dress! You will show him the contrast between the pale, frail Elsie and warm, rich-blooded Hilda. You will triumph over your meager rival. Ah! if the only chain that bound men were flesh and blood and passionate impulse, then would there be no hope for Elsie. But there is the bond of pity, the bond of helplessness, the bond of clinging tenderness, the bond of gratitude, the strong bond of conventional duty, and the yet stronger one of consideration for worldly interest and social approbation. Elsie has odds in her favor."

"I do not fear them. Duty, as well as love, binds Gerald to me. He is my lover and my husband."

"I am very glad that he is," he answered, with a little sardonic bow. "So you look for him to-day on the 'Etruria'?"

"Yes, at three o'clock. You will excuse me. There is something I must do before I go down to the pier. I will see you some other time."

"You will see me again to-day, and you will be glad to see me," he answered.

"Why?" I faltered. I had grown to believe that he could foresee at least such things as were on the eve of happening. "Will not Gerald come on the steamer?"

"He will come, but not alone. He will not be free to give his time to sweet dalliance with Hilda."

As he said this he turned, as he stood in the door-way, and disappeared. But his words fell with prophetic gloom on my heart. I threw off the spell, however.

"I will not believe it," I said to myself.

I would be happy in the belief that all would be well. Only let Gerald come once more within the clasp of my arms—the radius of my influence—and I would have no fears. Let

Fate but give him back to me. Elsie's money might go to the bottom of the sea, for aught I cared now. Ambition was dead within me. Only let Gerald be mine, as he was before I dreamed of the deed that had separated us!

In an hour I would see him. It was now two o'clock. The "Etruria" would arrive about three—or so it had been reported in the ship news, which I had eagerly consulted every day.

I hurried to the pier, reaching it before the hour of three. The steamer was not in sight. I took up my position outside at the end of the open, projecting pier. Within, and on the landing side without, I had seen a few people who seemed also to be waiting for the steamer to come in. Among these I thought I recognized Gerald's uncle, accompanied by two gentlemen and several ladies.

The sight of him made my heart sink. If indeed it was he, then he must be looking for his wife and Elsie. They were to be with Gerald on the "Etruria." He was not coming alone.

Still, I would not give up the hope that he had already left Elsie, and was returning without her. But if it were otherwise, if he had not been strong enough to take this step, or if he postponed it out of pity for Elsie until she was on her native shores once more, then I would strengthen his will with my own. I would speedily bring him to do as I now so ardently wished and resolved—leave Elsie at once.

I sat down in the same place where three months and a half ago I had stood watching Gerald sail away, with Dr. McKenna watching me. An old sailor had brought me a seat and had assured me that the steamer would be in, but not exactly on time.

I had waited more than half an hour when she came in sight. There were people standing on her decks, and I raised my *lorgnette* with a trembling, eager hand, and put it to my eyes. In a moment I had distinguished Gerald.

There he stood, and near him there were only two men. She was not there.

He was leaning over the rail, and he, too, placed a glass to his eyes while I looked. He recognized me and waved his handkerchief quickly, as though he feared to be observed. I answered the signal, and we continued to look at each other, while the steamer rapidly drew nearer the landing-point.

Something drew my attention, and when I looked again Gerald was no longer alone. She was beside him. She had her hand on his arm. One hope was destroyed, but I strengthened myself to bear it. It was no matter—I would change this with one interview.

I scanned her form—her features—as well as I could through the glass, but she wore a loose wrap, and a veil was blowing about her face.

I could get but an intimation of how she looked; but there was something in the firmer poise and fuller outline of her figure that told of increased strength and health since I had seen her last.

As the steamer came nearer I saw Gerald make what I took to be a warning gesture, and I dropped my veil and sat down, waiting.

He would come to me. He would go home with me. Tea would be waiting for us—a beautiful little tea—the table decorated with flowers and grapes.

The "Etruria" steamed up to the landing, and the gang-plank was thrown out. Gerald made me another furtive sign. I interpreted it to mean that I was to keep quietly seated and wait until he had seen Elsie in the carriage with her aunt. Then he would come to me.

Alas! that I must stand aside, veiled and unacknowledged, like a secret mistress, instead of coming joyfully forward to be embraced as a wife! But this would only be for a little while—a very little while—I said to myself, the blood tingling in my veins as I saw Elsie's face—

thin still, but no longer death-like—only delicate—and with a soft tint on her cheeks and a light in her eyes. Her step, too, was no longer tottering as she walked beside Gerald.

I saw him lead her carefully along the gang-way—saw them met by their friends with joyful greetings and exclamations of pleasure at the improvement in Elsie and of regret at Gerald's looks. For Gerald was looking pale and worn.

"It was the Roman fever," I heard him say. I knew something beside the fever had given him that anxious, care-worn look. I loved him more dearly for the paleness that made him look more noble in my eyes. He, too, had suffered anxiety, and he had not the physical rebound that belonged to my exuberantly vital nature. He gave me no other look, though I watched for one through my thick veil. He stood a little while on the pier, shaking hands with his friends and talking to them; then he moved away, with Elsie on his arm, in the wake of the plump aunt and her gaunt spouse, and with the others walking beside them.

"The carriage has been waiting a good hour," I heard Mr. Oldridge say.

I stood up as they moved past, and Gerald, half turning his head, gave me one swift, secret glance and a nod scarcely perceptible.

Then I waited until all the passengers had left the steamer, except a few busy sailors and a ship's officer.

Would Gerald not come at all? Would he go on in the carriage with Elsie, and know that I—his wife—was standing here unkissed, unspoken to after that long, torturing absence?

Fierce, bitter feelings filled my heart, and when Gerald came at last, with a hurried step, and haste and flurry showing in his face, I turned upon him eyes burning with resentment.

He came to my side. He drew me to him and kissed me quickly, first looking hurriedly around to make sure that he was not observed.

- "My darling," he said, "I came to you the instant I could get away, on a pretext that I had left something behind in the vessel. I am afraid it was not prudent for you to come to meet me, dearest."
- "I wanted to see you," was all I could say. My throat felt hot and parched.
- "I know that, my darling. I was dying to see you, Hilda; but this public place is not one for our meeting. There is the purser looking at us. He knows me, and this stolen interview naturally excites suspicion."

"Let it," I said; "you are doing nothing wrong. I am your wife."

I looked full at him as I said this, and I saw him wince. But I noted at the same time how very pale he was—how changed was the look of his eyes, once so frank and clear.

"Were you very ill?" I asked, my heart softening.

- "I was very ill for awhile. I would have died but for the faithful attention I had."
  - "Attention? You mean nursing?" I asked, quickly.
  - "And a good physician," he answered.

Then he went on rapidly to praise my looks.

- "You have ripened fast into such a lovely woman, Hilda! How sweet your mouth looks—and your cheeks are glowing! I am so glad! I feared to find you worn and pale. You have taken my advice and had a good rest, haven't you?"
- "A rest from the dress-making," I said; "but I had other work. Ah! I have a secret for your ears—a grand secret, Jerry. But let us go home. Tea is ready for us, and mother and Nell are looking for you."

A shadow came over his face.

"Hilda, darling, I can't go with you now. They are

waiting for me; I must go at once. My uncle wishes to see me about business, and—"

"And Elsie expects you to spend this afternoon with her," I interposed.

His pale cheek flushed.

"My aunt will think it strange if I do not," he said. "Hilda, you know how I am situated; you know how necessary it is to be careful. But I will come to-night—I will come by nine o'clock. Till then, good-bye, dearest. Ah! there is that confounded purser looking at us—I can't kiss you, dear. I will make up for it to-night."

He was gone. I was left standing there, the sharp pain of disappointment aching in my heart.

I went home and locked myself in my room to think. But one sole thought possessed my brain. Gerald must leave Elsie Vaughn this night. That mad scheme which I had instigated must end now. Of course Gerald did not wish—did not intend to keep it up; he must have some idea as to the best way of getting out of the terrible dilemma. His was not a bold nature; he would shrink from breaking loose at once—taking at once the step of leaving Elsie, and leaving the city, his business and his interests. Yes, that was natural; but it must be done eventually.

It was the only thing to do. His former marriage could not be avowed now. That would entail not only disgrace, but a trial for bigamy. No, there was no alternative now but flight. Let him go at once; I would follow. Let him leave Elsie at once, or I would go mad. I realized now that Elsie was no longer a specter—a creature to be pitied only. She was a woman—and oh! the shame, the anguish to me of having forced my husband into the arms of another woman.

I realized it now. I felt that punishment had indeed fallen upon me. I had been made to feel that another had a claim upon the being I looked upon as wholly mine—a claim that was recognized as paramount to mine.

Was it possible that Gerald loved her—that pale, insignificant little creature? Oh, no—no! I would not believe this—but he must not stay by her side another day—another night. I must demand that. He must go away. Oh, if I had money to give him to go somewhere and get into business. He has only Elsie's money. He shall not take any more of that. He will not, I know. Would to Heaven he had never touched a cent of that money, and that I had never heard of it. If only I had some of my own to give him. If I could sell my book outright to the publishers instead of waiting for it to be bought. Could I not do this? Might not Dr. McKenna do it for me? If I could only see him this minute!

I jumped up as the thought came, and uttered, aloud: "Yes, if I could only see Doctor McKenna and ask him to"—I stopped short with the feeling that he was near. Yes, that was his stealthy knock. I threw the door open and held out my hand to this man whom I did not love—did not trust, yet he had grown necessary to me.

"I told you that I would come; are you glad to see me?" he said, quietly.

"I am glad," I answered.

He bowed over my hand, which he held in his soft, flabby fingers.

"I am afraid that is due to something apart from your desire for my society," he said.

"It is. I—I want to hear about my book."

"It is accepted. They will publish it, and pay you a royalty on each book that is bought."

"Will they not buy it outright? Will they not give two thousand dollars—two thousand dollars down—for the manuscript?"

"It may sell for twice that much if you will wait. In the opinion of the reader it will be a success—make the tenstrike of the season."

"I can't wait. I must have money at once—this very

night, if possible. Tell the publishers for me that I will take a thousand dollars for the book."

"That would be useless, Hilda. They would not break their rules. The book must go on the market and take its chances."

I wrung my hands, moaning under my breath:

"What shall I do?"

- "Why do you want money so badly, Hilda?"
- "That does not matter to you. You have no right to ask."
- "I have no need to ask. You want money to help you play the game against Elsie Vaughn—that game in which the precious dandy, Gerald Oldridge, figures as the high stake. Well, you will need more than a thousand dollars, or even ten times as much. You will lose the game. I have warned you already. But you shall have the thousand dollars. I will buy your story at double the sum and take the risk. I will put that card in your hands. I like to see the players fairly matched in a game."
  - "There is no game," I cried. "You shall not talk to me so, Doctor McKenna. I have done a foolish thing, a senseless, a wicked thing. I have drawn my husband into it; now I want to help him to get out of it."
    - "And he'll refuse your proffered help."
  - "He will not! You insult him by saying such a thing.
    My husband loves me. He does not love Elsie Vaughn."
  - "He may not be madly in love with her; but there are other things that influence a man in making or holding a marriage."
    - "You are thinking of her money."
  - "Yes, of that for one thing. Money, and the consideration it brings in the social and business world, would weigh greatly with Gerald Oldridge. Reputation would weigh more with him—the fear of being branded as dishonorable. Then her love for him—"

- "That love is nothing to him. He does not care for her."
- "You do not know that. She has a charm of her own. It is made up of innocence and sweetness of heart, of generosity and love—trustful, tender love. She has poured this out upon her husband. Also she has poured her money into his hands. Gratitude is a bond between them. Duty is another."
  - "His duty is to me, his wife."
- "Believe me, that Elsie Vaughn seems to him this moment more like a wife than you do. He regards her with more respect—he feels more bound to her. Why? ask your flashing eyes. Because the marriage was open. It had the sanction of Church and society. She is his acknowledged wife. You seem to him like a mistress."
- "You insult me—you madden me!" I cried, stamping my foot. "Go away. I will not take your money; I will not listen to your cruel assertions or your counsel."
- "You will accept both, because you need them. Here—I will write the check for two thousand dollars, in consideration of which you convey to me all interest in your manuscript. Does that please you?"
- "Yes, yes. It is a great favor. I will tell you, for you know it already, that I want the money that I may put it into Gerald's hand and say, Go away. I will come to you. Leave Elsie at once."
- "And if he refuses you will keep your promise—you will denounce him?"
- "I will keep my promise. I am safe in saying so. I will not be called upon to denounce Gerald. He will not forsake me. Love and duty bind him to me."

He bent his head, with that mocking gesture and shadowy smile, as he held out to me the check he had just signed with the queer cabalistic letters of his name.

I thanked him, and then I said:

"Now I will ask you to leave me alone. I can not bear any companionship."

He bowed.

"I will leave you certainly; but before midnight you will summon me again—if not by word, then by thought and wish."

He went. I was left alone, with the fears he had fully conjured up for company.

## CHAPTER XX.

WHAT torture is like the torture of suspense? What agony like that of waiting for a blow to fall on your naked heart, dreading the worst, yet hoping it may be averted?

Such torture was mine during the remaining hours of that September afternoon and evening. At last I took chloral to tide me over it.

At eight o'clock I roused myself from the artificial quiet induced by the drug, and set about preparing for the interview with Gerald.

"I must pit myself againt my rival, it seems," I said to myself, with a mirthless laugh. "I must bring what advantages I have against this Elsie, with her goody-goodness and her money, her influential friends and the blessing of Church and society to back her. I have my claim upon Gerald, my old hold upon him, my strong determination, and what good looks I may possess."

I looked in the mirror; I was deadly pale. The black hair disheveled about my cheeks and temples made them look yet more white. But I would have color, I knew. Fortunately I had the thin, sensitive skin that soon glows with excitement. And the fever at my heart would make my dark eyes sparkle. With a sensitive, nervous brunette, such as I was, all possibilities of beauty come out when passion or excitement fires the heart. I would glow in a

few minutes through this whirl of emotion that chloral had checked for awhile.

I arranged my hair into its many soft, black, lusterless coils, then I put on my gown—a red India silk with a front of thin red net, through which my white throat and bosom showed gleamingly. It was sleeveless, save for folds of the red net that fell away, showing my arms to the white globes of the shoulders.

I took out my fan of satin and carved sandal-wood, painted with pomegranate blossoms, and fluttered it nervously as I stood before the mirror. There was color and sparkle enough now in my face. I smiled, well pleased at the dark, flashing picture. Then a quick thought pierced me.

"It is as McKenna said; I am more like the mistress than the wife. Elsie wears to-night a simple white dress—I am sure of it—and her smile is calm and sweet, and her presence quiet, restful, and home-like. The aura of the wife is about her; she appeals to his instinct of protection, to his love of domestic purity and quiet. Alas! there is nothing restful or wife-like about me. Yet there might have been had I been circumstanced like Elsie Vaughn. But no matter; he is mine, and mine he shall be. He shall not return to her to-night."

The clock began to strike nine as I spoke. Every stroke seemed to fall upon my naked nerves. My eyes were on the door, my ears intent for his step upon the stairs.

But the seconds ticked away and he did not come.

It was ten minutes past nine when at last I heard his well-known tread upon the stairs. He came in dressed in rich black, looking pale and thin; but it was a pallor and a thinness that became him. Never had I seen him look so distinguished; never had his features seemed so finely chiseled.

I came to meet him, smiling and holding out my hands. His eyes caught fire; he clasped me in his arms and strained me to his breast; his passionate kisses burned upon my lips. Then he suddenly put me from him. He stood looking at me silently. His face expressed a struggle. Love was there, but also pain and indecision.

At last he sighed deeply, and again drew me to him.

"Hilda," he breathed, with his lips against mine— "Hilda, how sweet—how dear you are! How can I give you up? I can not!"

"I should hope not," I said, laughing and laying my head against his breast. I felt happy and reassured. "You will never be called upon to give me up until death comes, my beloved." Then, half playfully, half seriously, as I looked up into his face: "But you have managed to do without me all these months, I find."

"They have been unhappy months to me, Hilda. I would not tell you how unhappy; I did not want to add to your anxiety. I wanted you to get strong and well this summer—I am so glad you could leave that unsuitable work—so I tried to write cheerfully. But now—you see in my face that I have suffered."

"Yes, I see it, dearest," I answered, smoothing out the lines in his forehead with my fingers, as he sat, his head leaning against my breast.

"It is I who did it—I who caused these lines. Forgive me. I can hardly forgive myself."

"Hilda, you did not know—neither of us realized the full wrong and misery of what we did—the wrong to ourselves, and the wrong to her—the innocent one."

"She has not suffered as we have. She did not know, and she had you, and you have been kind."

"I tried to be, but, oh, Hilda! I have felt like a villain all along. And she so trusting—so loving—"

I crushed my lips together to keep back an impatient exclamation. It was the gall of bitterness to hear him speak so feelingly of her—to know that he was making pity for her almost a first consideration. But I answered gently:

"We will not talk of the past. It is useless. We made a horrible mistake. The fault was mine. It was through my mad desire to see you rich and myself your proud, acknowledged wife. It was my sin, and I have suffered for it. Oh, Jerry! I have suffered cruelly, and it is bitterness to me that I have made you suffer. Would I could have borne all the consequences of my sin."

"It was my sin also, Hilda. I was a man. I knew more of life than you. I ought to have withstood your persuasions; I ought to have been strong enough to put aside the temptation when it was held out by your hand, my sweet Eve. Ah, Hilda! the trail of the serpent is over it all—all the good that we have gained by that sin."

"We have gained nothing—nothing. I have lost you for four miserable months, and you, too, have been unhappy. And you have blamed me. Well, I deserve it; but oh, Gerald! I will make up for it in the future. I will be so good, so helpful. I have discovered that I have a talent—a gift that can be turned into money. This is my secret. How sweet it will be to earn money to help you!"

His brow contracted.

"Don't speak of money!" he exclaimed. "I hear the word enough from other lips. Oh, we will have no lack of money, my Hilda! That is one pleasure I have purchased, at least. I shall be able to give you all you want. I have brought a full purse for you to-night. And I have brought a little gift for you, dearest—something that will go well with your radiant gown."

He was unwrapping a little ebony box as he spoke. He touched a spring, and the lid flew back. On the purple cushion inside flashed a pin and ear-rings of diamonds and rubies.

I looked at them a moment, then I shut down the lid and gave back the box.

"What is the matter, Hilda? Don't you like them?"

- "They are beautiful, and I thank you for thinking to get them for me, dear Jerry, but I will not take them. I will take nothing bought with Elsie Vaughn's money—nor must you. We will pay back all we have been forced to use; after awhile, when we are able, as we will be, we will send it back to her. She need not know whence it comes."
  - "Send it back? What do you mean?"
- "I mean that you must go away at once. That is the best way out of this terrible complication. Go away without saying a word. I will come to you, and we will begin life anew, in some place where we are not known."

He remained silent, looking down, a tumult of emotion in his expressive face. He lifted his eyes at last.

- "Hilda," he said, "I can not go away; I have to-night signed a business contract; I have entered into partnership with my uncle."
- "With Elsie's money? The contract is null and void, for you have no right to her money."
- "I have been using it pretty freely for four months, all the same."
  - "We will pay that back."
- "How, I should like to know?" he exclaimed, bitterly. 
  And how am I to get away, even? I have no money, except hers."
- "I have money—enough for that, and more. See, here is a check for two thousand dollars. It is mine. I give it to you. It will suffice for the present, and I can make more. It is the proceeds of a book I have written. There are more books in my brain. Take the money, dearest. Our scheme has failed. It is too late to regret that we ever entered upon it. All now to be thought of is to free ourselves—to free you from the wrong position it puts you in. That must be done at once. It has been too long delayed already. You must go away. Stay here to-night with me, and to-morrow draw the money the check calls

for and go away. Go to some western city—San Francisco, Mexico. You can soon gain a foothold there."

He sat and listened to me. His face was white and agitated. He did not speak for a moment, then he said:

"Gain a foothold? Can I gain, too, my own lost selfrespect? Can I forget that by my cowardly flight I will have lost friends, reputation, honor—everything?"

"Do I then count for nothing? I have said I would come to you."

He bent his lips to my bare shoulders.

"Yes, my beloved, you count for much, but-"

"You are hesitating, stammering. Tell me—speak out at once: How do you propose to extricate yourself from this situation?"

He looked at me with haggard eyes.

"Before God, I do not know!" he said.

"You surely know that you can keep up this farce no longer. The object of it has failed. Elsie Vaughn will live! The pretense that you are her husband should cease—must cease—this very night. You surely do not wish to keep it up? Why do you hesitate?"

"It would kill her!" he said, huskily. "Her life is bound up in me. If I should desert her she would die!"

I sprung to my feet, my brain whirling with fierce passion.

- "Let her die!" I cried. "What is that to you? Your duty is to me, not to her!"
- "Not to her? Do I owe nothing to her—she who has loved me all her life, who has trusted me so utterly? I owe it to her that the burden of debt is lifted from me. I owe my life to her. It was she who saved me at Rome. She came to me; she would not be kept away. Frail as she is, she nursed me night and day. She has heaped kindness and benefits upon me."

<sup>&</sup>quot;And you love her?"

My voice was steady. The very strength of the passion within me made me quiet.

- "I would be a brute not to feel gratitude and esteem for her after all she has done for me."
- "Gratitude and esteem! Speak the truth to me, Gerald; let there be truth between us at least. You love Elsie Vaughn?"
- "I have lived with her nearly four months as her husband. She has given up her very soul to me; she has been by my side every day; she has slept in my arms like a child. Her very trust and helplessness endeared her to me. She—"

"Enough!"

I silenced him with that cry of despair. I reeled as from a blow. He sprung to my side and threw his arms about me. His touch brought strength to me—strength born of passionate anguish. I pushed him from me with all my might.

"Do not touch me! You have deceived me-you, who

swore to love me always!" I cried.

"Hilda, I do love you. No woman has such power to thrill me as you do—to make my pulses throb and burn."

"You love me with the sensuous passion a man feels for his mistress; you love Elsie with the tenderness a man feels for his wife."

I saw in his eyes that he could not gainsay my words.

- "And now go on," I said. "Let us understand each other. What is your proposition? What do you intend to do?"
- "My hands are tied," he answered, gloomily. "Turn which way I will, it is wrong and dishonor. Hilda, why can not things continue to be as they are? Be mine in secret—my loved and cherished one. All that love and money can do to make you happy shall be done."
  - "While you remain to the world the husband of Elsie?"
  - "There is no help for it. It makes mine a miserable

double life, full of dishonor in my own eyes; but what can I do? I have wronged Elsie Vaughn unspeakably. It is the wrong of the betrayer of innocence and trust, and she the child whose mother committed her to my care. I owe my life to her; I owe her innumerable kindnesses. Can I desert her now, when her life is bound up in me and desertion would kill her?"

- "Either her or me—you must choose between us. How do you dare to insult me—your lawful wife—by such a proposition? Share my husband's love with another woman? I will kill him first or kill myself. No, either you give her up or you give me up forever. If you return to her this night or ever again, I will see your face no more. I swear—"
  - "Hilda, listen to me."
- "I will listen to nothing but your declaration that you will leave Elsie Vaughn this night and never see her face again. Will you promise this?"

"No, Hilda."

"Then go, and never speak to me again. Go-"

"Hilda, listen to me."

"Go!" I cried; "but do not think I shall let you enjoy life while I am wretched and deserted. No, you are not quits of me. We shall meet again; we shall meet before the bar of the law. To-morrow I will go before a magistrate and denounce you for bigamy. I will publish your crime to the world."

How white he looked! how wild! as prospective disgrace and ruin were dashed into his face.

- "My crime!" he said, at last. "Hilda, had you no part in that crime?"
- "I care nothing for that; I care only for having my revenge upon the man who has deceived me, who has stabbed me to the heart. He shall be punished."
- "Be it so," he said, with white lips. "I will take my punishment as my just deserts. It is better than coward-

ly flight; it is better than to desert the woman I have wronged so cruelly."

"And have you not wronged me?" I cried.

"Have you forgotten that you forced the necessity of wronging you upon me, Hilda? It was against my will—against my conscience. But now—"

"Now-in the face of exposure and disgrace-you re-

fuse to leave this woman who is not your wife."

I came close to him and laid my hand on his arm. I felt that as he looked at me in the fullness of my physical beauty, and the ardent intensity of my nature, he must feel the greater charm I possessed. It was my final appeal.

Warm and passionate entreaty rang in my voice.

He was fearfully moved. I could see it as he stood looking down on me. His face was ashen white; his eyes were dark with pain. I thought I saw signs of yielding. A quiver passed over his mouth; its stern lines seemed to relax. I would—I must triumph.

He spoke at last. Slowly, resolutely, the words dropped from his pale lips:

"I refuse to desert the innocent woman I have deceived—the woman whose tender care saved my life. I refuse to desert the mother of my unborn child."

My hand dropped from his arm. He turned and left the room.

### CHAPTER XXI.

HE was gone. I stood, like one turned to stone, staring at the door through which he had disappeared.

He was lost to me forever. He was bound to her—the mother of his unborn child.

I had never dreamed of the possibility of that bond. Ah! that made her pre-eminent; that invested her with sacredness. It was not enough that she had society on her side—relatives and friends and money, and her own ap-

pealing helplessness and fondness—but she was also the mother of his unborn child.

That gave her a claim above expediency or gratitude. She was fragile—her life still hung in the balance, and to forsake her would be to kill her, the mother of his child.

I it was who must be the forsaken one, I was the Hagar who must give up my claim to the husband that was mine by the law of the land, and mine by this agony of bereavement that clutched my heart as with a hand of steel. I stood there, with Gerald's last words sounding in my ears and Gerald's last look stamped ineffaceably upon my brain.

"Is this horrible thing a reality? Has Gerald forsaken me? Has he preferred another to me—to me?"

It seemed incredible—a miserable dream from which I must waken.

No, it was no dream. There on the violet plush cushions of the sofa lay the ebony jewel-case, open. He had left it there. I caught the red flash of the rubies, and snatching up the box I dashed it upon the floor and trampled upon it.

"He thinks to treat me like a mistress," I cried, "to visit me by stealth—to satisfy me with a secret caress and gauds like these—while he gives his life, his cherishing, his respect to her. She walks at his side and leans upon his arm. She sits beside him at his hearth and his table before the eyes of the world—and I must be hidden here like a guilty thing. She has my rightful place. Does he dare to dream I will let it be? Never, never! I will trample upon him as I do upon his gifts; I will have revenge upon him and upon her. I will drag him down from his newly acquired station. I will brand him to the world as a felon. Let it cover him with disgrace—let it kill her. I will rejoice. It will give my heart the only ease it can know. Oh, you defied me, Gerald Oldridge. You told me to do my worst. But I saw the scared whiteness of your face. I know that the agony of your fear almost

equals my own agony of desertion. You are dreading to-morrow, and well you may. To-morrow a bomb shall burst upon the threshold of your fine bridal home—to-morrow all shall be known. Oh, that it were to-morrow now! Oh, that Erastus McKenna were here to help me work out my revenge!"

The instant after I had spoken I heard a slight rattling

of the door-knob.

"He is here," I thought. "He has watched until Gerald went away. He knew what the result of this interview would be."

"Come in," I said, aloud.

The door opened, and McKenna entered.

"Welcome," I cried, with a wild laugh. "It is just midnight—the hour for evil spirits. I have summoned mine."

He smiled.

"You flatter me," he said. "The devil is a fascinating as well as powerful personage. What has happened that you welcome me so warmly?"

"You know what has happened—what you predicted

and I would not believe. I am deserted-for her!"

"And now," he said, "you are ready to fulfill your promise?"

"Yes; to-night, if it were only possible."

"It is possible to make a beginning. I have brought a paper for you to sign, that in the event of your—"

"A paper? You were then sure that the interview

would result as it has?"

"I was sure."

"Did you know about—about—"

"About the child? Yes, I knew it."

"You are really, then, in league with the evil power." He smiled.

"There is no power, evil or good, other than the one that is in us—stronger in a chosen few. There was no witchcraft in this instance. I knew all that took place with our bridal pair while they were in Europe, because Elsie's maid was a former patient of mine—one of the spirits I have under my control. She wrote to me all the while. She was slow in obeying my bidding, however. Had she done as I directed, you would be happy in your Jerry, and I in the fortune that means so much to me. But the timid fool hesitated, brought herself under suspicion, and was dismissed by Elsie's husband."

"Elsie Vaughn has no husband. She is simply my hus-

band's mistress. She shall know that to-morrow."

"And the knowledge of it will kill her."

"He does not think so. He believes that nothing but his desertion would kill her—that she would live and stand by him through it all."

McKenna frowned darkly.

"Live! I do not believe it. She is still frail as a reed—and in her condition—why, the blow will kill her as surely as if it were a lightning-stroke. And she has made no will. Her maid tells me that Gerald would not let her make her will in his favor when she was ill at Baden-Baden. He loves her, surely. You may have him back—when she dies—but you will not have the money."

"I would not have him back for ten million times the money! All I want is to punish him for his treachery to me," I cried. The blood seemed bursting from my swell-

ing heart.

"That is bravely spoken. Will you feel that way tomorrow, or will you see him again, and let love throttle pride, and—"

"I will never see him again!"

"It is best to provide against a woman's softness of heart, so I have brought this written declaration for you to sign in the presence of myself and another. Read it."

He put the paper before me. A mist swam before my eyes, and I could hardly read the words upon the paper,

written in Erastus McKenna's cabalistic hand. It was the deposition that Gerald Oldridge had been lawfully married to me, Hilda Monteagle, more than a year ago, by a magistrate—since dead—in the town of ——; that Gerald Oldridge had lived with me, and acknowledged me as his wife to my mother and sister, who had lived in the same house with me.

As I read this there flashed over me a vivid recollection of that secret marriage—my own suggestion—of the visit to the town and the return by steamboat, when we sat on the deck, hand in hand, while the rich sunset melted into purple twilight and the evening star came out. How happy we were! How fond and sweet was my Gerald! And during that year of married life how kind and tender he had been, how happy he had made me, how good he had been to my mother and to Nell! And now I was bringing down ruin upon his head.

"Is this paper all that is needed for the purpose?" I asked, looking up at McKenna, who was closely watching

me.

"No, it would be necessary that you make this charge of bigamy against your husband in the presence of a magistrate. But I want you to sign this declaration as an earnest that your promise to make the public charge will be kept."

"Armed with this signed paper, however, you could make the charge of bigamy yourself, and cause me to be summoned to swear that I was Gerald Oldridge's wife."

"Yes, I believe it is your full intention now to keep your promise; but a woman is an uncertain quantity, particularly when she loves. You might, for aught I know, see this wildly beloved one to-morrow and accede to his proposition to accept a division of his affections."

At the mention of that proposal my blood burned again. I caught up the pen.

"Wait one moment," McKenna said. "I wish to have

another witness to your signature beside myself. Albert is outside the door."

"Albert! Does he know?"

"He knows nothing, except that I wished him to follow me. He will not read the paper—he will merely affix his name as a witness to your having signed it."

He was opening the door while he spoke. He called Albert in a low tone, and the boy appeared at once in the door-way. He had been standing all this while in the hall. He was pale and languid-looking. He came up to me and took my hand. His eyes had taken on their old appealing, hunted look; they searched my face sadly. My rich dress, the flowers withering on my fevered bosom formed a contrast, I know, to my face, white and haggard with anguish.

"Hilda, you are ill," he said, with emotion.

I shook my head.

"You are ill within. Something has happened to make you unhappy. Your hand is cold; I feel it tremble."

He pressed my hand to his lips.

Dr. McKenna frowned impatiently.

"Albert," he said, "the hour is late; Hilda ought to be in bed. We came here on business; she wishes us to witness her signature to this document. It is a legal paper—the purport of it does not concern you. Hilda, we are waiting for you to sign your name."

I took the pen he handed to me wet with ink. I bent over the paper. In another instant I would have dashed the name, "Hilda Monteagle Oldridge," across the page; but a touch stayed my hand—the touch of Albert's thin, pale fingers upon my wrist.

I looked up. Even in that moment of absorption in self, my heart bled to notice how sunken and dark-rimmed were the beautiful eyes of the boy. They were looking at me with imploring earnestness.

"Hilda," he said, in a hurried whisper, "what is that

paper? Are you going to sign yourself to be a slave to him?"

He sent a quick, frightened look at his guardian, who stood a step or two away from us.

- "No, Albert," I said; "I am signing myself free of some one—some one who has made me suffer. I am going now to make him suffer in turn."
  - "And will that cure your pain?"
  - "It will be a just revenge."
- "Ah! Then he made you suffer maliciously, and you did nothing to him—you did nothing to bring it on your-self?"
- "Who has given you the right to cross-question me?" I cried, impatiently.

But his words stirred a counter-current of thought and feeling within me. Swift as lightning came the answer of my inner consciousness to his question.

I did everything to bring the suffering on myself. I was the author of the wrong. And Gerald-my heart told me that he had done what was most natural, most honorable, under the circumstances. He had said truly that he was left no right ground to stand upon. In the complications that surrounded him he could only see that his duty was to the innocent girl whom he had betrayed—the girl who had loved him always and had saved his life—the mother of his child, yet unborn—whom to forsake would be to slay. His first duty was to this innocent, betrayed one—and I I had never truly admired and honored Gerald Oldridge until I saw him rise out of that soft weakness I had been wont to find so pliant, and refuse to desert the woman I had caused him to take to his arms. Through all my rage and despair at his refusal there had been a thrill of admiration for the man who for the first time defied me and refused to come under my control.

He had been in the right—as far as was in his power in this horrible complication—he had acted on honor's side. I was reaping what I had sown. Elsie Vaughn would have to suffer for no wrong-doing of her own. This is what the voice within cried out—all in a breath's space—as I sat with posed pen and looked into Albert's face.

I threw the pen upon the table.

"I will not sign," I said, and seizing the paper, I tore it across.

McKenna's face darkened with sudden fury. His eyes shot green lightnings, as he sprung to my side, uttering an oath between his set teeth. He grasped my wrist, and fastened his eyes upon me.

"You must sign this paper," he said.

Then came the struggle of two strong spirits. He had obtained the mastery over me once—that gave him a hold upon me—but that once was when I was in a passive, dreamy condition. Now my nature was aroused; every nerve-cord was strung to keen tension. My spirit was in arms. I gave back McKenna's look with one of defiance.

"I will not sign it," I said.

He felt that he had failed. His countenance changed at once. He drew me a step away, and said, in his mellifluous whisper:

"Do you thus yield everything to her? Are you so weak, so spiritless? Think what you will gain—the sweetness of revenge, the sundering of those two whose happiness and good fortune is built upon your misery. And there is another thing. Sign that paper, and you will be a rich woman—able to carry out all your ambitious plans—to queen it in society with the best. Half of the fortune that will fall into my hands shall be yours."

I wrung my hands free of his long, clinging fingers.

"I wanted money only for my love's sake," I cried.
"Love no longer exists for me. Ambition is dead. All
the gold in the world would not tempt me now."

He ground his teeth together.

"Cursed senselessness of women!" he muttered.

"Nothing counts with them but love. They must burn their wretched hearts to ashes before a glimmer of common sense can be made to reach them!"

Then he wheeled round furiously upon Albert.

"You are the cause of this. You shall suffer for it," he said, in the hissing whisper of concentrated rage.

The boy cowered under his look as under a blow. His face grew livid, a contortion passed over it, and he fell upon the floor.

"You have killed him!" I cried. "He is dying!"

He was writhing on the floor in convulsions.

McKenna bent over him. He took him up in his arms and laid him on the sofa. Then he passed his hands over his head and body, rapidly at first, then more slowly. The spasmodic motion of the limbs ceased, only a slight shiver ran now and then through the slender frame. The livid color died out of his beautiful face, leaving it white as marble. He lay quiet upon the lounge, his eyes closed, the shut lids twitching now and then.

McKenna stood looking at him. He, too, was pale. He drew labored breaths, as though the effort to quiet the stricken boy had exhausted him.

"He will be himself when he wakes out of this stupor," he said. "He deserved to suffer for his miserable meddling. But for that you would have acted like a woman of nerve and brain—you would have signed that assertion, and ratified it to-morrow by oath—you would have triumphed over the man who has scorned you—you would have separated him from the woman who is lying in his arms at this—''

"Silence!" I cried out. His words were a sharp knife in my heart. "Go away—leave me—go!"

My words reached the ears of the tranced boy. His eyes flashed open, his cold hand clutched mine.

"Don't send me away from you, Hilda," he pleaded.
"Don't let him take me. Let me stay!"

"You shall stay," I answered, bending over him. "You shall not go back to him. From this hour I stand between you and him; from this hour I shall prove my-self strong enough to stand against him in my own stead and yours."

My defiant eyes flashed upon McKenna as I spoke. He looked at me in silence a moment, then he suddenly bent his head.

"My red-robed queen," he said, "I never admired you so much as I do this minute. Hilda, you deserve to be my wife. You shall be some day—when my name is in the mouths of all men, and I have gold enough to ring that proud young brow with a flame-wreath of diamonds. All shall be in good time. Do you think I give up my purpose because you fail me? No; I shall only try another tack. Good-night, Hilda."

### CHAPTER XXII.

How often had I said to myself, "without Gerald's love I could not live." His love had been given, it seemed to me, in compensation for so much that had been denied me. I had known the sweetness of his sympathy—the joy of congenial comradeship—the thrill of tender and sacred union—what would existence be to me if these were withdrawn? Nothing. I would not accept the barren gift.

But I did accept it. I lived on without Gerald—nay, with the consciousness that he was near me, yet was not mine. The heart can bear so much without breaking. Yet life is not the same. It is a bird that drags a broken wing.

Early in the morning after that fateful night, I sent a messenger to Gerald with a note—just three lines:

"Do not fear anything from me. I will not harm you. Be happy and prosperous. All I ask of you is never to let me see you again."

In reply he wrote an impassioned letter full of self-reproaches and entreaties that I would see him again. This I did not answer. He came that evening. I was looking for him. I saw him from the window through the parted curtains as he came up the steps from the street. How pale and wretched he looked! how my heart went out to him! But I must not see him. Oh, what could it avail? What good could it do? Nothing could be effected. There was no way out of this dreadful difficulty. Nothing could unravel this horrible complication — nothing but Elsie's death or mine. Not even divorce could cut this Gordian knot, because divorce would require that the crime of bigamy be made public—the crime I had instigated.

The servant who went to the door gave the message:

"Miss Monteagle can not see you."

"I must see her," he exclaimed, and pushing the girl aside, he ran up the stairs—ran half-way up, then paused; and I, who stood listening with a hushed heart, knew that he was thinking during that pause—"What can this meeting bring to us but pain?" He descended the steps and went out without saying a word to the servant.

He wrote that night. He did not again ask to see me, he only begged that I would use a sum of money he had deposited in my name in the New York Bank of Exchange. I went the next day to the bank, drew out the money and deposited it in his name in a down-town bank with which I knew he dealt. I inclosed the certificate of deposit with only the words:

"I thank you, but it is impossible to accept any more favors from that source. I will repay what I have already unfortunately taken."

After this, silence fell between us—silence, and to me, desolation and heart-solitude. I was saved from utter despair by two things—my pen and my home. I was writing a story that had already been promised to a magazine.

The publisher was also the publisher of my book. The task gave me occupation and purpose, though the keenest stimulus no longer existed.

My home was sweet to me, as home with love and comfort in it must be to every woman. It was a bright, pretty flat with a chestnut-oak shading the street in front, and a bow-window full of flowering plants. The parlor had portière curtains of India silk, with amber background strewn with branches of red coral. The carpet, the wall-paper, and the furniture showed the same tints of amber and coral. Fitting into a niche at one end was Albert's piano. Dr. McKenna had sent it to him a few days after he took up his abode with us.

The doctor had made no attempt to force Albert back to Beekman Place. The thought occurred to me that he was willing that the boy should regain a part of his lost strength by staying away from him and the effect of his "treatment." He could not fail to see that his experiments upon Albert's delicately strung nerve-system threw it out of tune—"jangled the sweet bells" of reason and undermined his frail health. He was constantly tempted by his craze for experiment to tamper with the exquisite mechanism of this fine but delicate nature, but it was not his policy to destroy the being on whom depended his hope of getting possession of Elsie's money. This money, which he had determined should be his that he might carry out his wild scheme of the spirit-battery, could only come to him through Albert.

There could be no doubt that he would control it solely if it fell to Albert by Elsie dying under age or before she made a will, for Albert was like a baby, so far as money was concerned. He knew nothing about what McKenna was doing with his present fortune, considerable in itself.

He did not lack for spending money, it is true. My mother would take nothing from him for his stay with us, but he constantly brought home pretty trifles for the

house, together with flowers, books, and pictures, and he dropped a gold piece into Nell's savings-bank so often that she hid it out of sight.

After he recovered from the depressing and stupefying effects of the last attack, he grew brighter and better in health. He devoted himself to his music, but he was always ready to talk or to read to us, and sometimes he was merry and mischievous—playing pranks upon Nell. If Dr. McKenna came in when he was in one of these moods it was strange to see how suddenly his face clouded and he became melancholy and silent.

Nell was a great comfort to me in those dark days. I took her with me into my room—the pretty room I had fitted up so carefully to please Gerald. She slept in my arms at night, and I would stifle my sobs in the lone night hours for fear of waking her. In spite of this she sometimes awoke. I think her sensitive little soul instinctively felt the wakeful misery of the one that lay beside her. Her little fingers would touch my cheek softly to assure herself that I was crying, then her hand would caress me gently, stroking my hair and my cheek. This was her only mode of consoling, except sometimes a murmured, "1 love you, Hilda;" but I knew her sympathy with me was intense—too intense. It was affecting her health. She had never been a robust child; now she was white as a lily.

She had grieved over the loss of Gerald. For awhile she thought he was dead. The night of our short interview—the night of that eagerly longed-for day of his return, when he had failed to sit down with us to the pretty teatable that Nell had decorated with flowers—the child sobbed herself to sleep at a late hour. I had not seen her that afternoon. I could not bear to hear her loving prattle about Jerry when my heart was being consumed with suspense.

She did not know that he had come at all that night. I

had locked the door communicating with the parlor. I opened it later to admit my mother. She came in, and we sat beside the lounge where Albert lay in the half sleep, half stupor that seemed to follow his strange attacks. It was then I told her that I and my husband were separated. She believed that his uncle was the cause of the estrangement—that he had come to know of the secret marriage and his opposition had broken it up. She broke out into passionate blame of Gerald. I checked her at once.

"He has not been to blame. He has done me no wrong," I said. "I can not explain to you. I can only tell you the marriage is now as though it had never been."

With this she was forced to be content. She had always accepted what I did without question. To think for herself was not her forte—my poor, gentle mother. She puzzled over this strange rupture. I often caught her eyes fixed upon me with pity and bewilderment. I hid my suffering from her as much as I could, and after awhile I think she believed that I was getting over it.

Nell's intuitions were deeper. The child watched me all the time, and tried to comfort me in many silent, delicate ways. She believed that Jerry was dead. The impression came to her from my mother's tears and my white, unhappy face the morning after the dénouement in the locked parlor. My mother told her she must never speak Jerry's name—a name that had been on her lips a dozen times every day. She tried hard to bear this in mind, and when she chanced to forget she would look at me quickly and grow pale with the fear that she had hurt me.

One day I had gone to the business part of town on some errand and taken Nell with me. She was nearly always my companion now. I liked to feel her little fingers clinging to mine as we walked along. I went into a bric-a-brac store, leaving her just outside, entranced at the fortune-telling trick of some tiny green birds carried about by an old Italian and his wife.

Presently she came hurriedly into the store. Her face was all agitation, her eyes big and burning with excitement. She ran up to me.

"He is not dead," she panted. "Jerry is not dead. I saw him just now. He caught me up in his arms and kissed me. I told him to come in here. You were in here. He shook his head and said he was in a hurry, and he went on. But he will come to-night. I know he will come."

"He will never come again," I said, and it was all I could utter.

She looked at me in bewilderment. Then her lips began to tremble. She turned away, the tears rolling silently down her cheeks.

After that she never spoke of him, and she seemed to know by intuition that I had lost Jerry, whom I loved so well, and my heart was broken. She ministered to me in many sweet ways, and tried to divert me, as did her older, but hardly less child-like comrade, Albert.

The days dragged on. I wrote with feverish energy sometimes; then, when a mood of restlessness seized me, I would call Albert to play for me; or I would rush out and walk in the streets, the park—anywhere so that I had motion to help deaden pain.

Dr. McKenna came to see me occasionally. I hated and feared the man; but his talk, his presence, had a fascination for me. Besides, I wanted to find out from what he might let fall what new scheme he was maturing to get possession of the money he had set his heart upon. The desire to possess it had become a craze with him. I did not believe he would give up trying; his fertile brain would hatch some new plan. I knew he had been denied admission to Elsie, and that her maid, who was in his pay, had been dismissed. Did her friends suspect his evil intentions? I do not think so. Elsie had probably some vague distrust of him or his skill. She had resisted his influence

when she was in a manner in his power, and afterward her watchful aunt had discovered that his presence acted badly upon his patient, and had caused him to be dismissed.

He was still sanguine of getting the legacy that had caused so much trouble, and that could be gotten only by the death of Elsie. Would he gain his object? I was consumed with the desire to know. I believed he would finally compass whatever he undertook. His strength of purpose was marvelous.

I found myself somehow expecting every day to hear of the death of Elsie Vaughn. Did I wish to hear it? I knew in my heart I did. The thought of her was a constant poison to my days. It was death to peace and sleep. I said to myself that I would never claim Gerald Oldridge as my husband again—I had given him up. But, oh—thought of keenest anguish—I had given him up to another!

It was against her that my heart was hardened to cruelty—almost to murder. I could bear to live without my husband; but to know that he was living with another was a thought that drove me often to the verge of madness.

And McKenna read in my eyes the secret of my thought. He knew that I had struggled in vain against the mad longing to hear Elsie Vaughn was dead. His eye met mine with the significance of mutual understanding. I shrunk from this community of crime. I shuddered with horror at myself, and yet when he would speak of his wild scheme—the odic battery—and say, "I shall soon have money to make it a success—I am only biding my time," I felt a thrill of guilty joy run through me.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

ONE morning I waked up to find myself famous. My book had appeared, and it had created a ripple in the reading world. It was the sensation of the hour—emphatic-

ally of the hour—for the little eddy of success that a new book creates in these latter days is short-lived. Another literary sensation soon appears, and the former one is forgotten. It is like the waves—one comes riding proudly in, breaks, and is succeeded by another.

But I had my wave. My book took hold of public attention for its brief hour. It was praised, abused, misunderstood. The best art that was in it was almost ignored, the worst was cried up extravagantly as something novel and original. The book was pronounced startling, lurid, surcharged with emotion—written by one who had tasted of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. It was also called vivid, true, and even great. I was described in the newspapers—my face, my dress; the story of my life was given—wildly wide of the truth. Society—eager to catch any floating straw of sensation to tickle the blasé interest of its party goers—society sent me its cards. I accepted the invitations. I was ready to plunge into any current that might assuage the burning of my heart.

I went first under the wing of the wife of my publisher. Albert went with me. Afterward he, too, was sought after, and he accompanied me wherever I went. His gift of music, his singular beauty and graceful fragility attracted attention. He became an object of much curiosity. We were believed to be engaged lovers. Albert showed his devotion to me with his usual child-like frankness. He turned from the flatteries of diamonded belies the moment I came near. When he had played with unusual sweetness, and applause hummed about him, his eyes sought me out, and my smile and nod were more to him than all the clapping of white hands.

I had attended several of these receptions, and had not yet seen Gerald. The feeling of disappointment that came over me, after I had swept the room with my eyes and found he was not there, enlightened me as to the underlying motive that had brought me to these assemblages. I

had hoped to see Gerald—to see him and Elsie together. I could tell whether he loved her as he once loved me.

At last my wish was granted.

I was looking my best that night. I wore black gauze with my favorite flowers—the double scarlet pomegranate. My arms were bare, my neck and bosom gleamed through the thin, cloud-like fabric. I was sitting in a corner, behind some broad-leaved plants, talking to a well-known journalist, when Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Oldridge were announced.

The voice of my interlocutor became an unintelligible buzz, and the room with its lights and faces went round.

When my vision cleared I saw the two standing and talking for a moment to the tall hostess. Beside her massive figure the girl at Gerald's side looked like a child. How small and dainty and lily-like! With her pale face, her large, limpid eyes, her gown of simple white lace bound with a soft, white sash about her waist, and some white flowers on her breast and in her hair, Elsie looked like a young novice waiting to kneel and have her bright hair shorn for the veil rather than like a woman—a wife. She was not pretty, no—the little, thin, pearl-white face had no claims to beauty; but even my grudging heart was forced to allow her the perfection of grace—a child-like unconsciousness. And how sweet her voice was—how sweet her smile!

Jealous impulse prompted me to look first at her, then my eyes rested upon Gerald. His face bore traces of the trial he had been passing through. It was worn and pale. He did not see me at first. When at length he caught sight of me I was conscious of the sudden change in his face, though I was not looking at him. I was bending, with apparently absorbing interest, to listen to my companion.

After that his eyes turned to me every moment when he fancied I would not see that he was looking at me. There

was watchful jealousy in that look. He had heard the rumor that I was engaged to the boyish musician who always came with me. He saw Albert at my side—saw his manner, always so openly devoted. It gave him pain. I saw it.

"He loves me still," I thought, and my spirits rose to feverish height.

I was asked to sing. It was just after Elsie had sung in response to the pressing request of the overattentive hostess. Her piece was a simple ballad, rendered in a sweet, reedy voice. I went to the piano, elated with the consciousness that I could mortify her by the contrast of my rich voice with hers. Albert played the accompaniment of the finely dramatic song I chose. Never had my voice been so full of power and passion. It was not a cultured voice, but it had the wild freedom and lonely longing of winds sweeping over the prairies of my native south-west. Sung by a dark-eyed young southerner who had just written a successful book, it brought a burst of applause. I looked at Elsie. She was joining in the applause, her eyes beaming with frank appreciation.

She gave her bouquet of beautiful orchids to her husband, telling him to present it to me; I saw the act, and saw her bend to him with the whispered request, and I saw his look. He said something to her and quietly returned the flowers to her hand. He had refused to give them to me, and he had not applauded my song. Well, but he had felt it. I knew that by his face.

But Elsie's superior nobleness shamed me for the motive that had made me sing. There was no mean envy in this girl's nature. She was good, that was her charm. I saw Gerald look at her tenderly. There had been dark, troubled passion in his eyes when they rested upon me.

An hour later I was sitting with Albert in a window recess in the library that was now almost empty. Gerald came up and asked me to dance with him. His manner

was abrupt, and there was a look of sternness and repressed passion in his face that almost startled me.

"I do not wish to dance," I said.

- "Then walk with me—somewhere—let me speak to you alone."
- "I was thinking of going home. You will excuse me, please."
- "I can take no excuse," he answered. "I must see you—speak to you."

Albert's eyes were flashing.

"Must, sir. Your language is insulting. What right-"

"What right have you, impudent boy, to stay at her side continually. I have a right. She knows it; she will acknowledge it. I will proclaim it here—before every one—no matter what the consequences—".

I rose quickly.

"I will speak to you," I said. "Albert, it is necessary that I speak to this gentleman—on business. He is an old acquaintance."

As he led me away he repeated my last words, bitterly.

"Acquaintance! And you apologize to your new lover for speaking to me! It was for him you cast me off. Oh, Hilda! is this your constancy?"

He was mad with jealousy. He took me into the conservatory, and seating me in a spot sheltered from sight by palms and azaleas, he poured out a torrent of wild words—reproaches, entreaties, passionate love. I listened to it all, outwardly cold and controlled, although inwardly my whole being was in tumult.

At last I said:

"You will then leave Elsie and come to me? You will come to me, no matter what the consequences, as you declared just now—though they be death to her and her child?"

His features writhed with pain. For a moment he hesi-

tated; his head dropped upon his hands. Then he looked

up.

"I—can not leave—her," he said; the words seeming to be forced through his white lips by a power he could not resist. "Oh, Hilda! you forced this cruel issue upon me. I can not surrender every particle of honorable and dutiful feeling; and yet I—love—you—I can not give you up. I can not see you smile upon other men. It maddens me. That young musician loves you—boy though you say he is —he loves you. You suffer him to be with you all the time. You will come to love—"

"Love?" I cried, starting to my feet. "I hate the word. I will love no one; I will tear the feeling out of my heart. What is it you want me to do? To share your love with another? I would not share a throne with any other. And a heart—my husband's heart—once all my own! No, Gerald, there is a gulf between us love can never pass. My hand dug that gulf, you say. Let that be granted. The mistake—the crime was mine. But it is done—it can not be undone—it can not be helped. It is better that we do not meet again. If we do meet, let the past be unremembered. Recall it by no word, no look. Good-bye."

I forcibly drew my hands from his clasp, my look from his agonized, burning eyes. I almost flew back to Albert.

"Let us go," I said. "I long to be out in the cold night air. I do not care for such scenes as these. They bore me. We will not come again, soon."

I was fearfully shaken. All the old feelings had rushed over me at Gerald's touch, at the look in his eyes, bent close to mine. He loved me still. I knew that now. Nothing kept him from me but his sense of duty to Elsie. Oh, why could she not die?

### CHAPTER XXIV.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. I had been writing all day on my new story, only stopping to eat the little lunch of bread and fruit and tea that Nell brought to me, saying, as she set down the tiny tray:

"The tea is nice, Hilda. I made it myself."

She put a red flower from her geranium plant in the slender vase on my desk. She kept the little vase always supplied with a flower or a bit of greenery—something for Hilda's thoughts to light upon, "like a butterfly does, you know," she said, in her quaint way. The child had a poet's soul.

It was four o'clock, and the afternoon was beautiful. It was late in October—the last week of that sumptuous month. The dreary spell of the Indian summer hung over the land. Tints of yellow and scarlet showed among the leaves of the vine that muffled the gray walls of the old building on which my study looked.

In the front room Albert was playing—improvising, I knew, for the sweet, vaguely melancholy music voiced the charm of the sunshine and the sky—tender blue, with white, sleepy clouds on its breast.

Presently the playing stopped; then came a quick tap on my door.

"Hilda, you have been shut up from me all day. Come, go out with me somewhere—to the park, shall it be? The park is lovely, and you haven't been there in a week."

No, I had not been there in a week. Our new home was near Central Park, and I was accustomed to walk in it every day—sometimes with my mother and Nell, sometimes with Albert, and more rarely alone. I did not now love solitude. I was afraid of being alone with my own

thoughts. But I had shunned the park of late, for twice I had encountered Gerald there driving, with Elsie at his side, and, since that interview at the reception, my one prayer was never to see either of these again.

To see him was only to feed a passion that I must starve out of my heart; to see her was to wake a feeling that terrified me—a bitter hate, a fierce desire to dash her from the place—there at the side of my lover—my husband—though to do it should dash the life out of her white face forever.

I dreaded to meet either her or Gerald. It unnerved me for hours afterward, and yet I had a constant, morbid longing to go where I might see them—myself unseen. It was only by the exercise of my will that I had kept away from the park so long. I could not resist the temptation to-day.

"Yes, we will go to the park," I said to Albert. "The changing trees are beautiful, I know;" and I went at once

and put on my walking-hat and jacket.

"Where are mother and Nell?" I asked, as I rejoined him, drawing on my gloves.

"They went out a little while ago. We shall find them

in the park, perhaps."

The loveliness of that Indian summer afternoon—it is painted on my memory forever—its tints of frost-kissed leaves and mellow sunshine framing the dread and horror that made the day one never to be forgotten.

We took our way at first along the winding paths that led among rocks and trees, where we could hear the chirp of the sparrows in the red-berried bushes and the chatter of a friendly squirrel, looking down at us from a limb overhead. Then that unhealthy craving to see what I yet knew was not good for me to see led me to say to Albert:

"Let us look at the drive a little while. I like to watch the horses."

Perhaps it was something more than the morbid craving

—perhaps it was some Heaven-sent impulse that drew me to the drive that day. I believe now that it was. I have been brought to feel sure that the Being who created us to carry out some hidden purpose mysteriously shapes our destinies and controls our slightest movements to that end.

And it so happened that my steps were strongly drawn to the park drive that day—so strongly that I overruled Albert's desire to stay in the shaded foot-ways.

We took our seats upon one of the rustic benches that are placed here under the trees that border the drive, and watched the various equipages and horseback parties that went by.

We had been seated there but a few moments when I saw approaching a pretty open carriage, drawn by irongray horses—Gerald's horses, I knew, at a glance, but Gerald was not in the carriage. Elsie sat there alone. She was dressed entirely in black—a black hat with drooping plumes framing her lily face and making its fairness more striking.

I looked at her eagerly, while the carriage came slowly up the drive.

"Ah, her paleness is not the sallowness of ill-health. The outlines of her face and figure are gathering fullness. She is growing strong and well. She will live!"

I said it bitterly to myself, and hate and cruelty surged up in my breast all in an instant. The next I took my eyes resolutely from that fair face and turned them upon the coachman, who sat stiffly upright on the seat in front.

What was there about the man that all at once made the blood stand still in my veins?

He was simply the stereotyped New York coachman—a copy of his English prototype—in the regulation London rig—closely buttoned coat with cape and pulled-up collar, tall hat and gauntlet gloves. His face was clean shaven, his hair gray. He looked the respectable, middle-aged

coachman, that was all. There was only one slight irregularity—he wore glasses set in dark tortoise-shell rims.

A puzzled sensation dazed me the instant my glance rested upon him. In the next breath I knew him. I caught a green flash from under the dark-rimmed glasses. The clean-shaven coachman was Erastus McKenna!

Could it be? I stared at him as the carriage passed. The face was almost unrecognizable. The thick, long beard had so hidden mouth and chin that their revealed outlines changed the entire look of the face. His figure, too, was altered. Padding inside the buttoned coat and the coachman's stiff cape made him look greatly more massive and broad-shouldered—if indeed it was he.

While I gazed at him in doubt, there came another flash from beneath the glasses. This time a flash of recognition—of mutual intelligence—of warning. He had seen my start and my stare of half-bewildered terror.

That look was enough. I knew now I was not mistaken. The coachman who was driving Elsie's carriage was her ex-physician, though she did not dream of such a possibility.

Why had he assumed this disguise? I knew at once. I knew the instant I met his glance of stealthy warning that his presence there meant death—death to the child-woman reclining against the cushions behind him, her lace mantle gathered shyly about her to hide the hint of maternity scarcely perceptible in her slender shape. It meant death to her and her unborn child—Gerald's child.

I held my breath with horror as the carriage rolled slowly by, the coachman looking straight at his horses after that one significant, furtive flash directed at me.

"Hilda, what ails you?"

I passed my hand across my dazed brow.

"Why did you jump and looked so frightened?"

"Oh!" I laughed at last, "it was a caterpillar. Didn't you see it drop on my arm from the tree?"

"Was that all?" He looked at me keenly, but he was as unsuspecting as an infant. "I didn't think you were afraid of anything, Hilda? Shall we go on now to the lake and take a little row on the water?"

"Not yet. We will sit here awhile longer, or we will walk on. I want to see if any one I know is out driving to-day."

He said something about the dust of the boulevard, but I did not heed. I walked on up the drive, keeping close to the grass-bordered edge, my eyes fixed upon the carriage until it disappeared around a curve of the boulevard.

Something was going to happen—something horrible. McKenna would never let his purposed victim leave the park alive.

As I walked there in the sunshine of that fair day a battle raged in my soul. The angel and the demon within me fought against each other. The one cried out to me to give warning of the crime I felt sure was about to be committed. I could do it easily.

A mounted policeman was coming toward me. I looked at him so intently that he checked his horse and gave me a glance of respectful inquiry. Should I speak to him? Should I tell him to wheel his horse and ride ahead—ride fast, for a life's sake, and overtake the carriage he had passed a moment ago—the carriage with the iron-gray horses and the gray-haired, spectacled coachman—overtake it and arrest that coachman? He was in disguise. He meant mischief to the woman inside the carriage.

This is what I could say. The policeman might doubt my sanity. He might take me for one of the class of cranks and sensationalists he often encountered; but he would pay heed to my warning. He would ride back from curiosity, if nothing else, and keep an eye on the carriage and its driver.

But I did not speak. The Spirit of Darkness stifled the words in my throat.

"What business is it of yours?" it said. "That woman has stolen the place in your husband's heart and home that belongs to you. She stands between you and the love that is your life. If Fate is about to strike her down, let it. It is not your hand that deals the blow. And you do not even know that McKenna means immediate mischief. He may have put on this disguise in order to approach his former patient and reinstate himself in her favor."

I did not believe this suggestion, yet I allowed it to in-

fluence me. I said, doggedly, to the better impulse:

"I will not expose myself to ridicule by acting on a mere suspicion. I need not exhibit such zeal on behalf of my happy rival."

All this while I was walking on and on, with rapid steps, and Albert, wondering at my strange mood and my

burning eyes, walked beside me.

And as I walked I listened, with ears keenly attent. I listened for what? A woman's scream—some sound that should announce the tragedy I felt was about to take place.

I heard nothing—nothing but the call of the cat-bird in the bushes, the plaintive note of a grasshopper in the yellowing grasses, the measured roll of carriage-wheels in the distance.

A red leaf dropped on my arm from a limb overhead. I started; it seemed a splash of blood.

A mist, as of blood, swam before my eyes. A tremor seized me. I gripped Albert's hand with a force that made him start.

"It has come—it has come!" I cried out.

"What has come?" he asked, in amazement. "Hilda, what is the matter? Tell me. Are you—"

His question broke short, for now he, too, heard what had come to my more intent senses through instant spirit-telegraphy—a commotion ahead, an outcry of voices, a scream—shrill, piercing, full of terror—the thunder of flying hoofs, the rattle and whir of wheels spinning over the

ground with fearful velocity; then whirling into sight came a pair of maddened horses uncontrolled by hand or rein, a carriage that reeled from side to side through the speed that propelled it, with no driver on the coachman's seat, no occupant—yes, oh, yes! there on the carriage floor was a mass of black drapery, a death-white face—and again that scream—shrill, appealing, like the cry of a terrified child—rang out above the din of trampling hoofs and whirling wheels.

Behind, riding to the rescue, was a mounted policeman. The noise of his approach only served still more to terrify the runaway horses and accelerate their speed.

On they rushed. Just before they reached where we stood, transfixed with horror, a horseman, coming from the opposite direction, dashed up in front of them, crying: "Whoa!"

They faltered an instant only, then they swerved from their straight course, wheeled swift as thought, spinning the carriage round like a top, and made an oblique dash for the woods.

A cry of horror burst from Albert. I remembered in a flash that just ahead of where those blindly rushing beasts would enter the woods there was a rocky descent of several feet. Crash of the carriage and certain death of its occupant would follow the plunge down that rocky declivity.

An inspiration came to me—sudden and quick as though hurled by the hand of a god. I leaped forward as the horses were dashing past me and caught the nearer one by the bridle with both hands, and clung to my hold as the desperate beasts plunged on, dragging me with them—still swung and clung, while the horse reared upright, nearly tearing my arms from their sockets, while he plunged down, striking his hoof against my knee with a force that seemed to crush the bone—plunging forward again—he and his mate—dragging me again, still clinging

to the bridle, though now I felt as though strength and sense were nearly gone.

But help was at hand. I had checked the furious speed of the horses; the mounted policeman dashed up and seized the bridle of the off-horse. At the same instant Albert was at my side. He loosed my clinched fingers from their clinging hold, and surrendering the bridle to another policeman, turned to me. The horses were stopped. Trembling and snorting, with foaming nostrils, they stood, held by the strong arms of the officers.

There was a little crowd about the carriage. I looked for the black dress and the white face, but my vision was suddenly blurred.

- "Hilda are you hurt?" cried Albert, as I staggered into his arms.
- "Is she hurt?" I faintly uttered, when at last I could speak.
- "No, I think not. They have helped her out—her and the child."
  - "The child?"

He looked around. He uttered a cry of wild surprise.

"Oh, Hilda, it is Nell! It is our Nell! You have saved little Nell!"

I looked up. I saw in the group around the carriage Elsie, supported by a man; and in the arms of another man I saw a child—a child in a white frock, with disheveled golden hair, who stretched out her arms to me, laughing and crying at once.

"Nell!" I cried. "My God! little Nell!"

- "Oh, I'm not hurt, Hilda! The lady wouldn't let me jump out; she held me down fast in the bottom of the carriage."
- "And she saved you by holding you down, little miss," said the policeman. "If you had jumped out you'd have been a goner."

It was all I heard. A roar as of falling waters filled my

ears—a voice that seemed crying out: "You had nearly been your sister's murderer!"—then all was silence and darkness.

When I came to I lay on the grass of the park, near the scene of the catastrophe, my head in my mother's lap. Albert was chafing one of my hands, Elsie held the other. She was kneeling by me, her face bent over me, full of anxiety. I heard her say, just as I came to my senses:

"Oh, she must be hurt! Bring a doctor—quick—some one!"

I opened my eyes.

"I am not hurt," I said; "it is only the reaction."

I sat up. I saw Nell's little, pale face close to me. I drew her into my arms, and broke into a bit of remorseful, thankful weeping, my face buried in her yellow curls.

Oh, how near I had come to being the slayer of this being whom I loved with a sister's fondness and a mother's devotion! What a punishment for my sin had God mercifully averted from me!

Some one was taking my hand—was covering it with kisses. It was Elsie.

"Brave one—noble one!" she was murmuring amid her tears. "How can I thank you?"

1 lifted my head.

"Never thank me," I said. "I do not deserve it. I thank you—oh! I thank you upon my knees for saving my little sister. You held her fast in your arms—your frail arms—you kept her from jumping out and being killed."

"It was as little as I could do, when I had taken her in the carriage. The coachman did not want me to take her in, but I insisted. She looked so charming, standing beside her mother under the trees, as we passed, I wanted to give her a nice ride. Poor little one—it came near being her last ride as well as mine!"

"But 'twasn't your fault," said Nell, quickly. "The horses looked so gentle; they trotted on so nice, until the

coachman dropped his whip and jumped down to get it, and before he could get up again the horses reared right up, and then they ran-oh, how they ran! What made them mad so suddenly, I wonder!"

"There's a fresh bleeding wound in the flank of one of them, and a streak of blood on the other one's withers," said a policeman, coming up and lifting his hat to Elsie. "Can you tell how that came, ma'am? I can't see how he got hurt when he was running, unless he snagged himself against a limb of the tree there."

"That must have been the way he received the wound." He had no hurt before. And the horses were both gentle

-spirited, but easily controlled."

"That fool-driver dropped the reins when he got down. He must have been drunk. He ought to be took up; but he's made off with himself, and can't be found. Was he reg'lar in your service, ma'am?"

"No," said Elsie. "We have only had him since yesterday. Our coachman was taken ill quite suddenly. This man was known to him. He had good recommendations besides."

I understood it all. McKenna in his disguise had made a friend of the coachman. He had given him some drug in wine or beer to make him sick, and had taken his place for the time that he might carry out his purpose of murdering Elsie—a purpose so nearly achieved.

The dropped whip was a pretext to get down. had quickly inflicted the wound in the flank of the horse near him, and a slighter one upon the other horse with some sharp-pointed instrument set probably in the end of the whip-handle, knowing that the animals, wild with pain and fright, would run away.

I had known he would attempt some such thing when I recognized him on the carriage-box—when I caught that stealthy, cruel eye—the look of a tiger that is creeping on its prey.

I had known it, yet I had given no warning. I had consented to the murder of that innocent woman and her unborn child. Oh! I deserved the punishment that had so nearly come upon me.

Remorse tore my heart. All hate and malignant impulse against Elsie was gone. She had saved my little sister's life by her courage—the life my own wickedness had brought into danger.

Yet I could not bear that she should press my hand between hers and look at me with so much gratitude, and I could not accept her offer—her entreaty to let her drive us home in the carriage that had been brought for her.

"We live near; we have but a little way to walk, and I am quite recovered," I told her.

She had allowed no word to be sent to Gerald or her aunt.

"My husband is down-town at his office. There is no need to alarm him, and no need to trouble my aunt. I feel perfectly well—only a little excited," she said.

In spite of her fragility she had strong nerves and wonderful self-control. It was this that had enabled her to baffle McKenna when she was his patient, and to resist his efforts to get her under the influence of his will.

Before entering the carriage, she again took my hand in hers.

"Since you will not let me take you home," she said, "at least give me your address, that I may come to see you and bring my husband. He will be hurt if you don't. He will want to thank you with his own lips for what you have done for me."

"I have done nothing to deserve your thanks. Think no more about it, dear lady. You are kind to want to come to see me, but I am too busy to see any one."

"Oh, I know you are busy—busy with that magic pen of yours. I have read your book; I got it the day after I saw you at Mrs. Guernsey's—that night when you sung so

sweetly. I felt drawn to you then; I told my husband so. And you can not come to see me, or let me come to see you?"

"Not now; it is impossible. I thank you with all my heart."

It was all I could say. She looked at me wistfully—a little hurt, I knew. Then she shook hands with my mother, and stooped and embraced Nell, slipping a ring on her finger that she took from her watch-chain.

She kissed her hand to us with her sweet, infantile smile as she was driven away in the carriage, accompanied by a gentleman she knew, who had insisted on seeing her safe at home—fearing, as he told my mother, that she might feel the bad effects of the shock as soon as her excitement had subsided. I felt there was indeed danger of this.

The sun had set; the after-glow bathed the greenery of the park in pale, golden light. We walked slowly home—slowly, for now I felt physically the effect of the strain and exertion, as well as of the bruise I had received, and I felt the effect on my spirits of the terrible trial I had passed through.

"What was her name, Hilda—the name of that sweet woman?" my mother asked. "She gave you her card."

"I have dropped it," I answered.

"I think it was Alrich or Oldridge," said Albert.

"It is very likely," I said. "There are several families of both those names in New York."

# CHAPTER XXV.

"Look, there comes Doctor McKenna!" cried Nell.

We were near the Fifth Avenue entrance of the park. She was holding my hand as I walked on slowly, leaning upon Albert's arm.

I looked up at once.

"The child is mistaken; McKenna would not dare," was my thought.

But it was he. There he sat in his plain, black buggy, driving his large, black horse. He was dressed as usual in dead black, and there was his beard, his thick, but compact mustache, with the metallic shine that betrayed it was dyed, coiling snake-like about his mouth and hiding its expression.

Had I been mistaken? Had I wrongfully accused this man of attempting the double murder that had so nearly been committed? It must be so, yet I could have sworn to the identity of the eyes. And that look of mutual understanding mixed with warning—that look the disguised coachman had given me as he passed and that I had shuddered to receive, feeling myself a partner in his crime—could I have imagined that look? No; I had not been mistaken.

I knew I had not an instant later. McKenna saw us. As his eyes fell upon us he started so violently that the reins dropped from his hands. He did not know it; he was staring at little Nell. The child noticed it and cried out to him.

"What makes you look at me so hard, Doctor McKenna? Did you hear I was hurt? No, I wasn't. The lady held me fast and wouldn't let me jump out, and Hilda stopped the horses."

"Hilda stopped the horses!"

What a look he flashed upon me! I felt stunned—as if struck by lightning. It was a glare of rage and disappointment. But it passed as quickly. The man had a wonderful power of self-control. He bowed to me, smiling—if that half-scornful, half-malignant gleam of the yellow teeth could be called a smile.

"Hilda is quite a heroine," he said. "I suppose the policemen and the park habitués all called her brave as

well as fair, and the carriage dame called her my preserver and offered to introduce her into society!"

Nell did not understand the sarcasm.

"She offered to take Hilda home in her carriage," she said, "but Hilda wouldn't go, though she can hardly walk."

"Is she hurt?" he asked, his tone suddenly changing. He looked at me anxiously. "You are pale," he said. "Won't you get in the buggy and let me drive you home?"

I refused so coldly that my good mother was hurt at what she thought was an ungrateful return for Dr. Mc-Kenna's kindness. To palliate my rudeness she said:

"If you had given that invitation to me, Doctor Mc-Kenna, I would have accepted it gladly. I feel dreadfully shaken."

"I am glad some one of this family appreciates my attempts to be friendly," he said, as he bent from his seat and helped my mother to a place in the buggy.

If she had known that she was seated beside a man who, until a moment ago, had believed himself to be the slayer of her little child! But she did not know—no one knew or suspected. How many crimes as well as woes go on in this world beneath the surface? As many perhaps as come to the light.

When we reached home we found my mother and Dr. McKenna standing on the entrance porch waiting for us. A boy held the bridle of the horse. My mother asked Dr. McKenna to come in and take tea with us. He declined, but added:

"I will just say a word to Hilda upon business—a private word—about her book."

They went upstairs, and we were left standing upon the porch together. I looked at him. I could detect now that the mustache and beard he wore to-day were false. He had had them made as much like his own as possible

before he had shaved to carry out his disguise. The sham was not hard to detect when one looked at him closely.

He looked at me without speaking. His eyes were more than ever like two burning baleful intelligences.

"So it is to you I owe the frustration of my scheme?" he said at last.

"It is to me, or to some directing power acting through me that you owe the fact that you are not the murderer of two innocent beings," I answered.

"Spare me any moral reflections," he cried, with angry scorn. "They come rather ill from you. Can you deny that you wished for the death of that woman—your rival—that you longed for it—craved it as the one boon you had to ask of Fate?"

Alas! I could not deny it.

"You had not courage enough to make your wish a truth—and I had," he went on; "therefore I am a thing to excite your horror. You frustrated my plan-why? I thought at first it was because of the child, but your mother tells me you did not know that Nell was inside the carriage. You acted then upon an impulse born of the old superstitious ideas that were instilled into you in childhood. You could not rise above them—even when you knew that you were saving her life—for him. If you had kept out of the park, all would have been well. It was a wretched fatality—the ill-luck that has hounded me all my life. Do you think I shall give up my purpose because of this? You shall see. All things come to those who wait and work. I will no longer count upon your sympathy or co-operation. Only when I have accomplished this, my life-purpose—when fame and riches are mine—only then will I come to Hilda Monteagle and ask her to share my success. Then Hilda shall be mine-mine-her fair body and fairer soul. That shall be my revenge for her frustration of my plan to-day. I will conquer her will and her dislike. I will make her mine in spite of herself. I can

do it then, for I will be free. Now my unfinished purpose keeps me its slave. Till then, Hilda, good-bye."

He laid his long, clammy fingers on my wrist as he said the last words. Suddenly his fingers grasped my arm like a vise. His eyes flashed.

"Destiny shall be accomplished," he said, in a deep, intense whisper. "Erastus McKenna shall be crowned as the greatest discoverer the world has ever known, and Hilda Monteagle's lips—Hilda Monteagle's soul—shall be given to him as the greatest of his rewards."

He loosed my arm and darted away.

The man was mad. I had suspected it always. I believed it now. No sane man's eyes ever had that wild gleam. No sane man would pursue a purpose through scheming and crime in that monomaniacal way. He was mad—a one-ideaed crank, capable of appearing the quietest, the most harmless of beings. All the more dangerous because of this.

What would he do next? He would not give up his purpose. I had just heard him declare that he would never give it up. He would make an attempt in some other way to bring about the death of the woman whose money would then fall into his clutch. I knew this—knew he would pursue this object with the cunning and persistence of a monomaniac. Then did it not become my bounden duty to warn his intended victim?

I had uttered no word of warning—no intimation of foul play—after the accident to-day. I had no proof, it is true, but this was not the cause of my silence. My lips were sealed because of a feeling of guilt—a sense that I was in some degree an accomplice of McKenna. He had confided his criminal purpose to me, and I had kept his secret. I felt a horror of myself for having done this. I had been punished for it to-day. If my little-sister had been lying crushed and lifeless in her shroud to-night, I would have felt that her blood was upon my head.

Clearly my duty was to warn Elsie of the danger she was in from Dr. McKenna.

This was borne in upon me every hour of the week that followed. Yet I delayed doing it. I said to myself, "He will make no fresh attempt yet awhile, for fear of exciting suspicion."

I dreaded to speak, lest Dr. McKenna should retaliate by telling my own and Gerald's secret—a secret I now prayed would never be known. For now its betrayal could bring nothing to me but shameful publicity of my sin. It could not give me Gerald. He was lost to me forever.

It was a week of feverish unrest and indecision to me. At length, on the afternoon of the last day of the week, I was moved beyond my power to resist—moved to go at once and warn Elsie of her enemy. But first, I said to myself, I will see Dr. McKenna. I will tell him what I am about to do. The instinct of honor makes it hard for me to strike a blow at another in the dark, though that other is a would-be murderer. I will tell him that I am going to put Elsie on her guard against him. It may be that when he sees I am determined to do this he will give up his purpose and leave the city. It would be better if it could be managed this way; then I might at once save Elsie and preserve my own secret.

I dressed hurriedly, and went out. I found my way once more to that gloomy house on Beekman Place. I rang the bell. The old black woman came to the door. She opened it a little way and thrust her head through the aperture.

"Oh, it's you!" she said. "Doctor McKenna has gone out."

"Are you sure he has gone out?" I asked, greatly disappointed.

"In course I'm sure. He went out half an hour ago."

"Then I'll come in and wait until he gets back."
She demurred. She had been told to admit nobody.

"'Nobody' doesn't mean me," I said. "You know me, and know that he is a constant visitor to our family. We have his ward, Albert, with us. You'll let me go in and wait, I know."

I enforced my plea by slipping a dollar into her fat, black palm. She opened the door and admitted me into the doctor's study. I sat down in his big easy-chair before his desk to wait his coming.

At my feet was his waste-basket—a unique receptacle woven of red and blue withes by the Canadian Indians. It was crammed full of papers.

As the moments went by and no doctor appeared, I grew restless and fidgety. My foot tipped over the basket and spilled out some of its contents. I hastily righted it, and was putting the papers back in place, when my eye caught a name upon the torn scraps.

"My dear Mrs. Oldridge," I read on the transversely torn fragments.

The writing looked a little familiar, but if it was written by Dr. McKenna the hand had been disguised and made to imitate a woman's.

I knew his skill with the pen. At once I suspected another plot. What was it he had written Mrs. Oldridge in that disguised hand? This scrap was probably a fragment of a sheet upon which he had been practicing to get the handwriting or the style to his notion.

I got down upon my knees before the basket, and hurriedly searched for the other fragments of the torn letter. I found a handful—all, indeed, but one piece—a little triangular bit. I searched through the mass of papers for that in vain.

But I had enough to give me an understanding of the purport of this letter. I put the pieces together and read:

"MY DEAR MRS. OLDRIDGE,—I know how glad you are to help one of your less fortunate sisters, so I do not

hesitate to tell you of a case of pitiful need that our society has been informed of. The woman is refined and deserving. Ill-health and widowhood have brought her and her children to a fearful strait, but she is proud, and we must help her without wounding her self-respect. You are just the 'dainty Ariel' who can do this 'spiriting gently.' So I beg you will meet me at Mrs. Lawrence's lodgings, No. —— fourth floor, East 18th Street, to-morrow at four o'clock. I would call around for you, but I am obliged to go to Brooklyn early to-morrow morning to see a sick friend. Will return by Third Avenue Elevated Road, and get off at 18th Street Station.

"Yours lovingly, "KATE C. BOND."

I took in the devilish import of this letter the instant I mastered its contents. McKenna had written it himself, of course—written it in the name of a lady well known for her active charity—a leading spirit of some benevolent society that Elsie also belonged to. It was easy for McKenna to find this out, and to possess himself of a scrap of this lady's writing.

He had forged this letter—as a decoy—to bring Elsie to that lodging-house, where, no doubt, some pitfall was waiting for her—something that meant death. He had interpolated the clause about going to Brooklyn early next morning to prevent Elsie from writing to Mrs. Bond or calling for her in her carriage.

The appointment was for four o'clock. I looked at my watch. It was a quarter past three. There was no time to be lost—not a second. I was on my feet at once and out of the house. I hurried to the corner—there was no car in sight. A car in this quarter of the city is an incident. I could not wait. I walked on and on, hoping to see a cab that I might hire. None were to be seen. At last I grew desperate. A coupé drawn by two strong

horses was approaching. It was driven by a negro, and a man with a refined face sat inside. I stepped quickly to the middle of the street, and made an imperative gesture to the driver. He drew up involuntarily; and then going to the side of the coupé, I made my appeal:

"Sir, pardon me. You are a gentleman, I feel sure. I must get to East Eighteenth Street in thirty minutes. It is a matter of great importance—of life or death. I can not find a carriage. May I have the use of this?"

My white, agitated face must have been more eloquent than the words I almost panted out, for the man said "Certainly," and jumped out at once. He helped me into the coupé, and said to the driver:

"Tom, take this lady where she wants to go. Let the horses out—she's in a hurry. I'll wait for you here."

Tom did let the horses out, and to good purpose. Never had I been whirled through the streets of New York at such a dizzy speed.

Eighteenth Street was reached at length. We had been delayed at the last crossing. My watch pointed to five minutes past four. I looked down the street—a vista of brick and mortar. A carriage stood before the door of one of the tall, dingy buildings. Was it Elsie's? The horses were not the slender, spirited iron-grays that had run away with her a week ago. They were bays—fat and sleek. Ah! Mrs. Horace Oldridge's horses. I knew them now when we had come nearer. I recognized the carriage as hers also. Elsie was not in it. A young woman sat there alone on the front seat—a servant from her look and dress. Elsie's maid, no doubt. Where was Elsie? Had she not come at all? Had she gone into the house—and perhaps already fallen into McKenna's trap? Was I too late after all?

No; I was not too late. As the carriage stopped before the house I saw a woman standing on the stoop in the act of ringing the bell. The slender, graceful shape was Elsie's. I threw a fee to the driver and jumped from the carriage. I went up to Elsie.

"Pardon me," I said, "I must beg you not to enter that house. Harm will come to you if you do."

She turned around and looked at me in surprise. Then suddenly she said:

"Oh, it is Miss Monteagle! You are very kind, but I don't think it will hurt me to go up the stairs. I feel quite strong. And I have an appointment to meet a friend here, in the room of a Mrs. Lawrence. We are going to try to help her a little. Have you come on the same errand, Miss Monteagle?"

"No; there is probably no such case of distress. Mrs. Bond did not write that letter."

"Did not write the letter I received?"

"No; it was a forgery. It was a decoy to bring you here—to your hurt. It was written by the same man who in disguise cut your horses and made them run away—your enemy."

"Miss Monteagle!"

She turned so pale I thought she was going to faint. But no; this girl, frail as she looked, had more nerve and more power of endurance than almost any woman I ever knew.

"I did not know I had an enemy in the world," she said, recovering herself and trying to smile. "Who can it be? Whom have I injured?"

"I will tell you, because you must be put upon your guard against him. Measures must be taken to prevent his injuring you. It is your former friend and physician. It is Doctor McKenna."

"Doctor McKenna?" she repeated, a look of distress overspreading her face. "I never meant to injure him. I could not like him. I could not trust him altogether, though I tried to. He was so learned, and he was so kind and attentive. But I told my aunt how strangely his treat-

ment affected me, and she would not let me see him again. I know he was disappointed. He did not want me to come to New York, and he would accompany me. But he was well paid—indeed he was—and I wrote to him, and sent him a present besides. And he is so revengeful as this? He tries to injure me—to kill me! Oh, Miss Monteagle, are you not mistaken?"

"I am not mistaken. It was he in disguise who drove you a week ago; it was he who wrote the letter. But it is not revenge he seeks—it is our money. Do you not know he was the husband of your aunt—her second husband and that he is the guardian of your cousin Albert?"

She looked at me with wide, surprised eyes.

"No, I did not dream of such a thing. I never knew my aunt, or heard the name of the man she married last. He is Albert's guardian—"

"And Albert's master, so far as money is concerned. If he should succeed in doing you a fatal harm now your fortune would pass into his hands. You understand his motive now, do you not?"

"Yes," she faltered, looking white and sick. "But such wickedness is almost past belief. The man must be mad. I remember there was a strange look in his eyes."

"The man is undoubtedly mad. An asylum is the place for him."

"Poor unhappy being!" she said, gently. "But what was the nature of the harm he intended to do me here in this house?"

"I do not know. I have thought that it might be-"

But before any conjecture could be spoken, the hall-door opened and two women came out—middle-aged women, shabbily dressed, and wrapped in those dingy, faded shawls that Irish women of the working-class love to pin under their chins.

They passed us and stepped down to the sidewalk, stopping there to finish their talk before separating. "Mind you, Maggie O'Leary," said the elder one, "I don't say as it is that disease the poor creeter's got; but I do say it looks moighty like it, and it smells moighty like it. It's meself that ought to know the likes of it when I see it, Maggie O'Leary."

"That's a mortal fact," responded the other. "Well, I sha'n't be a-tattlin' about it; it's no business of mine,"

she added, as she walked away.

Acting on a sudden impulse, I stepped to the side of the first speaker, who had an honest face, though pitted with small-pox, and spoke to her as she was walking away.

"Will you kindly tell me what is the matter with the sick woman on the fourth floor back—what is the nature

of her illness?"

The woman shook her head.

"I'm no docthor," she said, shortly.

"But you are a woman, and you wouldn't let another woman with kind intentions in her heart go into danger—perhaps death!"

I looked at Elsie as I spoke. The woman, too, looked at her, and then she said:

"No; that wouldn't be right. Well, thin, I'll tell you. I'm a'most willin' to take me oath that the woman's got the small-pox—a bad case of it. I've had two childer to die with the dis'ase, and I've got the prints of its claws here in my face, and I ought to know it when I see it. But the docthor, he says it's Frinch m'asles, and he charged me to kape me mouth shut about small-pox."

"What is the doctor's name?"

"Divil a name of him I ever heard. He's a queer-lookin' one, wi' eyes as green as the sae. He saw the woman last week. She came over on the immigrant ship. She was failin' bad whin she got off, and she toppled over on the bench at Castle Garden, and the docthor was down there somewheres and saw her, and he said it was jist a cold and faverishness, and he had her and her daughter brought

here. Then he told her she had the m'asles; and he called me a fool for sphakin' a word about the small-pox, and said I should kape away, and kape me tongue in me head in the bargain, or I'd be prosecuted. But I couldn't kape me mouth shut and see you dilicate little leddy go up to her death may be."

"You were right, and the lady thanks you," I said. Elsie bent her head with a murmur of thanks from her white lips. She was leaning against the wall of the little

stoop, looking deadly pale.

"Oh!" she gasped, as the woman walked away, "how dreadful this is! I have such a horror of the small-pox. The very thought of having been exposed to it would kill me. And I have never been vaccinated. My friends thought it was a risk to be vaccinated when I was so feeble. Doctor McKenna knew this. Oh! Miss Monteagle, what you have saved me from! You have twice saved my life—and—another life bound up with mine."

She whispered the last words, as, blushing, trembling, she bent her head to my breast, her arm about my waist.

Could I return her embrace? No, for in the next breath she said:

"You will, you must let me be your friend, Miss Monteagle. You must let my husband see you and thank you. He was so grateful to you for what you did before. I never saw him so agitated. He could not speak at first. Then he turned off and bowed his head on the mantel-piece and sobbed like a woman. When I said, 'We must do something for her, we must give her some token of our gratitude and admiration,' he answered, sadly, 'No, she would take nothing, I know it, and she will not come to see us.' But you will, dear Miss Monteagle. You will let us be your friends?"

She lifted her pleading eyes—blue as wet forget-me-nots—to mine. The wife of Gerald Oldridge, my lover, my husband, was pleading for my friendship. I felt her charm,

I, dark and strong, with wild, hot blood throbbing in my veins, felt the charm of this white, gentle, tender creature, whose sweet mouth lifted itself to mine.

I could not kiss her. I could not kiss the lips his mouth had pressed. A tide of bitterness surged up into my breast—a mocking voice seemed crying in my ears:

"You have saved those lips for him! Fool! you have burned your own house over your head."

I mastered the feeling with one strong effort. I said gently: "You do not owe me any gratitude, dear lady"—I could not call her by his name. "Circumstances I can not explain gave me a knowledge of Doctor McKenna's feelings—a suspicion of his plans. I did what I could to save you from him. It was simply my duty—nothing more. So do not feel yourself under the least obligation to me. I thank you for your expression of friendly feeling, and I beg you will not think hard of me when I repeat to you that we can not be friends—that is, we can never hold intercourse as friends do. It is impossible. But you have my best wishes for your happiness—and your husband's. Remember my warning, and let me beg you to drive directly to your home, and leave it no more until that man is within the walls of an asylum. Good-bye."

I uttered the last sentence of warning impressively, because I had noticed a man on the opposite side of the street, who had walked to the corner and back again three times while we were standing on the stoop. He seemed to be furtively watching us. He was an old man, apparently, very gray, stooping, and dressed in a working-man's clothes. But I had reason to know Dr. McKenna's genius for disguises.

It was he indeed. When at length Elsie had entered her carriage and driven away, looking back at me with her wistful, puzzled eyes, and I stood alone on the sidewalk for a moment, the old man crossed the street in a rather alert manner for an aged person, and under the cheap,

faded old hat and the old-fashioned, silver-bowed spectacles I caught the gleam of the intensely vital eyes I knew so well. How they glared upon me!

He stepped to my side and hissed in my ear:

"I have to thank you again. You have twice foiled Now you shall pay for it! You have turned my love into hate. I would have given you riches, position, power to triumph over your wrongers. You have snatched the opportunity from me. You shall suffer for what you have cost me. To-morrow I shall take to a widely read paper, which delights to publish such things, a full account of a scandal in high life—a man who has committed bigamy has married an heiress, with the knowledge and connivance of his former wife, whom he still keeps and supplies with the rich wife's money. I will make it so plain that every one who reads will be able to spot the man, the delicate heiress he has criminally married, and the other wife who aided and abetted his crime—the handsome young author of the latest sensation in fiction. I think my true story will surpass her fiction as a sensation. It will convulse society. It will ruin those who have ungratefully tried to ruin me."

While these dreadful words were sounding in my ears, and before I could frame one word of reply, the old man walked on, leaning on his stick and mumbling seemingly to himself.

What should I do? What could I do? Warn Gerald. That was the only thing I could think of. He was still at his office, perhaps, for it was not yet five o'clock. I hastened to the Eighteenth Street elevated station, and took the down-train. I dreaded the interview, but it must be, and I nerved myself for it. Gerald might be able to do something to avert this fatal publication.

Bitter was my disappointment when, in answer to my inquiry at the office, I was told that Mr. Gerald Oldridge had that day gone to Boston on business.

There was nothing else to be done. I went home half crazed with anxiety.

A sudden change had come over the earth. The Indian summer was dead. That was her shroud—that pall of cloud which overcast the sky. A wild wind had begun to blow. That night a fierce storm swept over the city.

I watched it sleeplessly. I heard the trampling of the rain and the wild moaning of the winds. It reached its height about midnight; but an hour before that time I had had a vision—a vision that stamped itself upon my brain forever.

It was no dream. I was in my dusky-shadowed room alone, lying on the lounge, but not asleep. Suddenly a touch fell upon my hand—a cold touch that stung to my veins like ice. I started up. There before me—there plain, in the flash of vivid lightning, stood Erastus Mc-Kenna. And in his temple there was a round red hole, from which a stream of blood was trickling.

The apparition passed as swiftly as the lightning that had illumined it. But I saw it plainly. It was no illusion. To my dying day I will believe that it was no figment of my brain, but that I saw the immaterial substance of that strange being I had known as Erastus McKenna.

The morning would bring some news full of horror. I felt assured of this. I waited for day to break—for the coming of that earliest of city birds, the newspaper carrier. It came at last. The gray light broke over the wet, rainsodden roofs. It broadened. The life and stir of the city awoke, and the janitor, wondering at my early advent, handed me the "Herald," still damp from the press.

I turned to its column of latest city news. Ah! here it was—here was the paragraph I felt sure I should find:

#### "SHOT HIMSELF IN THE HEAD.

"Last night, at ten o'clock, Doctor Erastus McKenna, of No. — Beekman Place, committed suicide by shooting

himself through the head. He was very eccentric in his habits, and it is supposed he was deranged."

#### CHAPTER XXVI.

THREE years have passed since that dark life went out in storm. Three years that have brought a partial healing of heart-wounds—a measure of peace to throbbing pulses.

Work has proved my staff of strength, as it has proved to so many others maimed in the conflict of life. I have been blessed with work that I loved. I am connected with a paper which circulates far and wide over this broad land, and even beyond its borders. I speak through it to half a million of live brains and beating hearts—the brains and hearts of men, women, and children. And I speak—let me say humbly—words of truth and helpfulness. I know not how; it is that from this passionate, erratic being of mine can flow a stream that others find healing and strengthening. But so it is. Every day come letters written by stranger hands far away over the hills and rivers, saying that some published word of mine has comforted, or helped, or inspired the unknown writers.

"Always you sound the bugle-note of progress or the tender chord of sympathy," say these far-off friends, whose hands I shall never clasp, but whose "God-speed" is sweeter to me than I can tell.

And so I have come to believe that I am an instrument played on by something higher than any power within me—a reed blown by a breath purer and nobler than any that stirs the chords of my own individual being.

The thought is sweet. It wraps me sometimes in an atmosphere of comfort.

Sometimes. Alas! there are other times when my spirit is at war with itself—when old longings, old passions, old bitter feelings wake and tug at their chains.

But power to silence them comes at length, and with each struggle this power grows stronger. I am not unhappy, though love is denied me. I will not trample on my harp of life though its sweetest string is broken. I have my work, my far-off friends, and my home, with its comfort and beauty and its three dearly loved ones—my mother, little Nell—fast growing into young maidenhood—and Albert.

Albert's love for me is peculiar. It is at once pure and impassioned. He never dreams of marriage. He feels that he has that fatal taint in his blood, and that it would not do for him to marry or know the sweetness of paternity. No; he must remain with that part of man's destiny unfulfilled.

He knows, too, that I will never marry—that no child will ever call me mother, that I have poured out all the wine of passion upon one shrine, and now that chrism is forever empty. But he is content with what I can give, and so we two will go through life united by a bond sweeter and nearer than common friendship, purer and more restful than love.

He is the gentlest and tenderest of God's creatures, and he is strangely gifted, though his gifts are not for the garish light of the hall and the stage. Rarely will he play in public. His lovely music—creations of his own ethereal fancy—are reserved for us at home.

It is not often that I see Gerald Oldridge. Our paths lie apart. I shun the circles where I may meet him. I see his name often in the daily papers, and read of progressive enterprises or charitable schemes in which he takes a leader's part. Once, unexpectedly, I listened to a speech that he delivered on a public occasion—a noble, stirring speech, unpremeditated and spontaneous. When applause was sounding around him he sought my eye and I saw him flush under its one glance of praise.

He has sought me; he has written to me, asking only to see me and talk with me alone a little while. I can not see him. I dare not. My only safety, my only peace is in keeping a gulf of silence and separation between us.

But I do not—alas! I can not forget the past. I did not know how strong its spell was upon me until yesterday. It was a day of perfect June loveliness. The leaves of the trees in Madison Square just stirred with the breeze that came fresh from the bay. I stopped a moment under their shade to watch their graceful stirrings. A child's soft coo made me look down and notice a beautiful baby in a dainty carriage canopied with blue silk and lace. The little face under the lace shadows was sweet as the fairest rose of June.

"Whose baby is it?" I asked of the pretty white-capped bonne.

"Mrs. Gerald Oldridge's," she answered, with a proud smile.

Gerald's child! A spasm seized my heart. I was fain to drop on the seat near by and put up my fan to hide my face from the girl. A wild tide of memory and regret swept over me. My Gerald's child, and another woman its mother!

For a moment I could not move or speak. Then the necessity of keeping up appearances came to me. I murmured something about having walked so fast that I felt faint, as I rose to go. I looked again at the child. Its fringed lids flew open; it looked up at me and smiled. Gerald's eyes! Gerald's smile! I bent down and kissed the baby lips once, and hurried home like a hunted thing.

That night I could not bear to see any face, to hear any voice, even those I loved so well.

I sat in my room alone, and the bitterness of desolation was mine. What was friendship, what was fame? It was love my heart cried out for—love that I had tasted once

and knew to be the sweetest draft that life holds to mortal lips.

"Oh, love, I have lost you; then let life go too," I cried,

in rebellious agony.

I went to my trunk and took from it a picture I had not looked at for more than a year; I hung over it, I kissed it passionately, and then I held it unflinchingly to the blaze of the gas and saw it curl and blacken in the flame.

THE END

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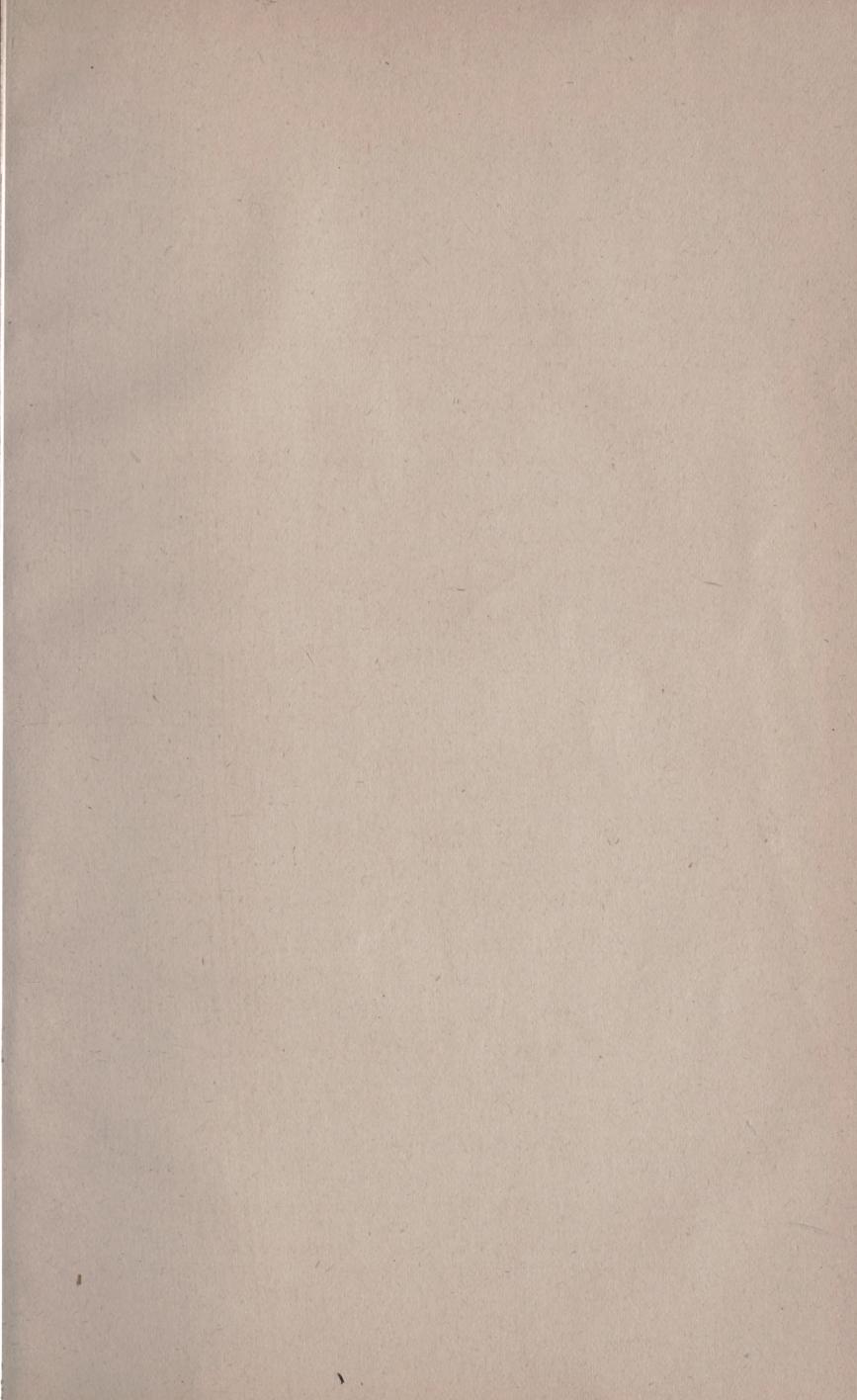
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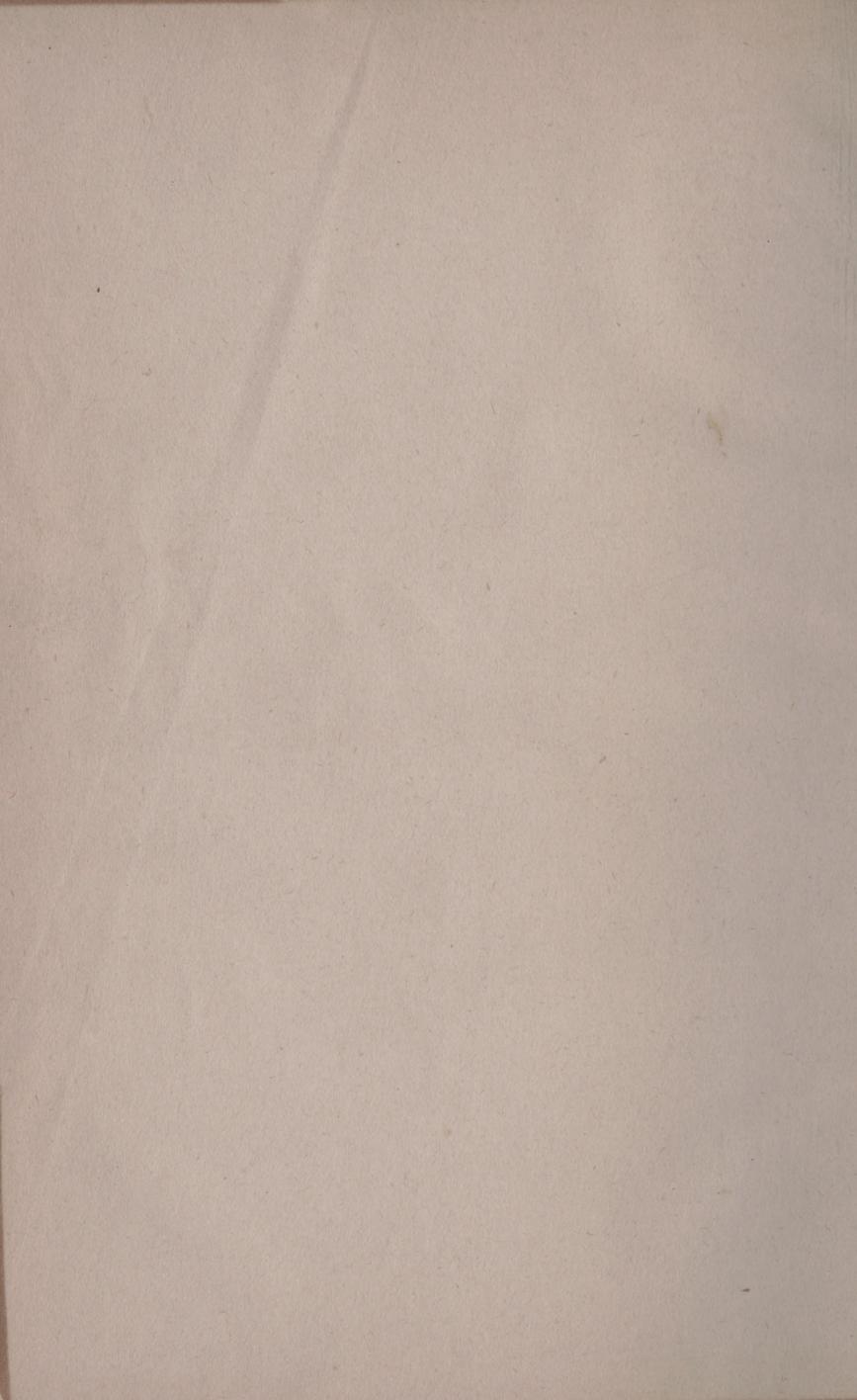
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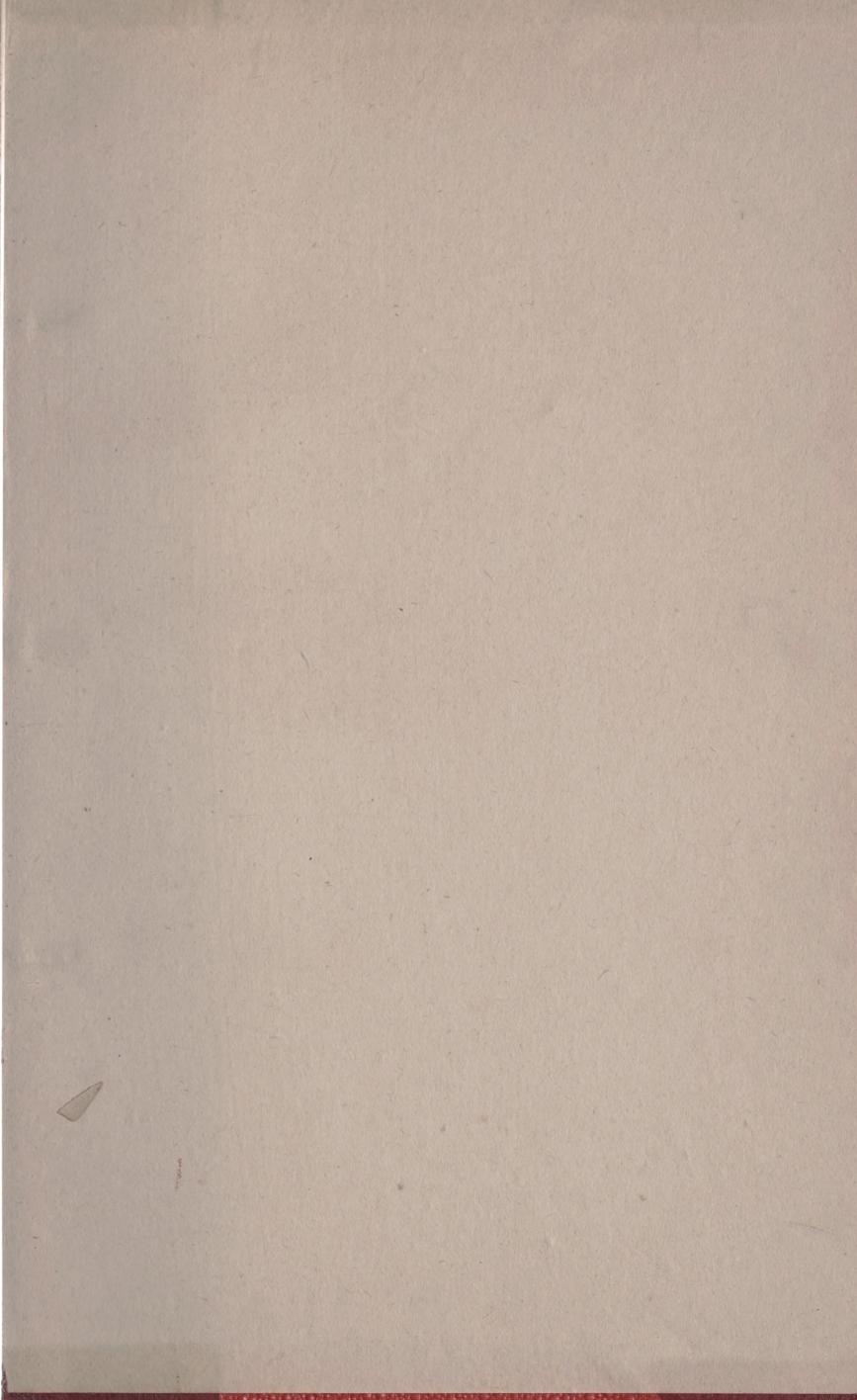
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